

Niharranjan Ray

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Niharranjan Ray

John W. Hood



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To
J. K. and Shanti Dutta,
and in grateful memory of
Dr Hiteshranjan Sanyal

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Preamble

Niharranjan Ray (1903-81) was one of modern India's most renowned scholars. Noted for the remarkable range of his academic interest and, more particularly, for his writings on Indian art, he made his major contribution to scholarship with his *Bangalir Itihas. Adi Parva (History of the Bengali People. Ancient Period)*.

First published in 1949, the work was immediately hailed as a monumental achievement. Aniruddha Ray wrote of the work:

In its methodology one sees the totality of a society in movement, the history of the life and thought of the common man of a particular geographical region, influenced by famine and scarcity and very rarely by prosperity.¹

And Sir Jadunath Sarkar acclaimed it as a beacon for future historians :

Our knowledge of our history shall grow so long as subsequent historians use this work as a basis for further research.²

In regard to content and approach, the book certainly broke new ground : first, unlike many Bengali historical works of its time, it focussed on society rather than on state, seeking to interpret ancient Bengal as a whole rather than in specialist fragments; and second, it sought to be history of a people rather than an account of the achievements of the privileged and powerful.

The work was also welcomed as a classic of Bengali prose. Given the epic proportion of its canvas, it is written in an appropriately lofty style and has been praised as elevating Bengali historical writing to an exalted literary domain. The notable literary scholar, Dr. R. K. Dasgupta, observed :

In Bengali literary circles, his work...is viewed as the achievement of a scholar who has realized that scholarship alone cannot produce great writing.³

The repute of Ray's *History*, then, rests as much on style and technique as on scholarly achievement.

No small measure of the work's importance in the annals of Bengali historiography is that its appearance generated considerable controversy. In pursuing an integrationist methodology, by focussing on the common man, and by extensively utilising literary and artistic material as historical sources, *History of the Bengali People* might have been seen as seeking to redefine history. In fact, by many established scholars, it was.

Indeed, in the orthodox parlance *Bangalir Itihas* is not a work so much on history, as history has been commonly understood as a fit resource to be recommended as a textbook for study and examination purpose or a source-book to be drawn upon as of any original or documentary value. Indeed, it is quite easy to understand why a renowned historian of the time had felt almost a compulsive urge to under value it as a work of any great merit. But it undoubtedly was, as had been held by another authority of high eminence, who was at that time held a pillar of wisdom in the field of projecting in an extensive and diversified canvas.⁴

Probably no other historical work of that era gave rise to so much disquiet and anxiety in traditionalist scholarly circles.

Mention will be made later of the vast range of subjects in the prolific output of Niharranjan Ray. In all of this, perhaps, the *History* is the centre-piece. While it is, in itself, a remarkable achievement in the discernment and interpretation of the essential harmony at the root of human civilization, its vision and its methodology evolved out of earlier creative enterprises — particularly in the field of art history — and, in turn, gave shape and substance to subsequent writings on diverse topics, all seeking to integrate the various aspects of human experience in quest of the harmony inherent in a richer understanding of humanity.

Niharranjan Ray's Life and Times

It is an easy truism that every man is a product of his times. It is far more difficult—perhaps impossible—to discern what particular aspects of his times may have influenced a man as well as the extent to which they might have affected him. The Bengal into which Niharranjan Ray was born and in which he lived his life was a maelstrom of evolving political ideologies, social values and cultural directions, and the eddy was kept in swirl by a vast passing parade of diverse thinkers, agitators, artists, holy men, zealots and social reformers : all idealists, some orthodox, some radical, some eccentric and some exotic. Whatever Bengal may have lacked from the turn to the middle of the century, it was certainly not colour.

In this chapter I shall try to draw something of a picture of what one might imagine Niharranjan Ray's Bengal to have been. I will consider the land of Bengal together with some of the salient aspects of its contemporary history and some of the prominent ideologues, thinkers and artists whose lives coincided with Niharranjan's. The aim is not so much to assert direct influence as to present that which Niharranjan might well have effectually imbibed.

The land itself should be considered first. Bengal is sub-tropical, largely riverine and has a warm and moist climate. But as in greater India, there are significant geographical variations throughout. The land offers not only variety but also stark contrasts, such as that between the delta region of Khulna and the red ruggedness of Birbhum. The beauty of the land consists largely in such variety. But the immense interest Bengal affords is not merely climatic or topographical, for the geographical variations give rise to a socio-economic diversity. Hence, in the lives of the people, no one district epitomises Bengal.

It should also be remembered that in terms of greater India Bengal is something of a frontier zone, more on the edge than a part of mainstream Indo-Aryan civilization. Thus it has

been easy—perhaps more so than in many other parts of India—for its inhabitants to think of it as exclusively theirs.

How was the world of Niharranjan Ray shaped by his physical environment? In the Preface to his *History of the Bengali People* Niharranjan talks of the ardour of youth that urged him to travel throughout Bengal recording indelible impressions of its landscape, its moods of nature and its people. In all of this he perceived a unity, an integrity, for which he developed a profound love.

I have written this book inspired by that love and wanting to give to it the deeper foundation of knowledge, so to realize a more profound, closer involvement in my country. My Bengal and its people are not to be found in the pages of ancient manuscripts; rather, they are inscribed on my heart.⁵

Elsewhere he refers gratefully, in a vein not unlike that of Jawaharlal Nehru⁶, to the opportunities for travel granted him by his youthful work in the Congress movement.

But the greatest gain was that active participation in politics brought my country and my people nearer to me, physically and emotionally, and I came to acquire a deep love and regard for both. From pure abstractions of text books they for the first time became real to me, endowed with life and substance. Political lectures, group meetings, secret errands, link activities, etc. took me from one end of the country to the other, obliged me to spend nights in peasant huts and haystacks, seek shelter in abandoned houses and temples, play hide and seek with the police in city-lanes and village markets, for instance. And thus I came into actual physical contact with our people at the middle and lower class and grass-root levels; their sorrows and suffering, their depravity and degradation, the poverty and squalor and depression they suffered from as much as their joys, their hopes and aspirations, their traditions and values — all these lay bare before my eyes. I also saw the old glories of the country in various stages of preservation, decay and disintegration, and suffered

nostalgias as most people do, but more interesting to me were the reactions and responses of the common man to these glories. I observed, wherever I found myself, the fields and villages, the rivers and the mountains, cities and market-places, the configuration of the land, its flora and fauna, cropping pattern, the land system and land relation, the village organization, the kinship relation, the fairs and festivities, and dozens of other things. All these gave me new insights and perceptions, which seemed to impart new meaning and significance to what I knew from my studies in the history and geography of my country. They raised questions in me which our history books and historians had no answer for.⁷

Ray's Bengal travels, then, can be seen as providing him with a thorough experience of fieldwork, essential to an understanding of society and culture. They also provided him with a motivation and a rationale for the writing of his *History of the Bengali People*.

Whereas Niharranjan's natural environment was age-old, his social environment was to a large extent newly evolved. In nineteenth century Bengal, British political and economic interests were well served by the ascendancy of the *bhadralok*, many of whose members became "collaborators" in imperialist rule⁸ or, as Macaulay might have had it, "interpreters". For the most part, this elite were Hindu with a social background best described in European terms as middle class. They were urban, products of the new Western education, and proficient in the English language; many of them were aficionados of English customs and manners. Their political prospects were, however, limited. Whereas many of them managed to amass substantial fortunes outside of government service—in agency work, for example⁹—real power was denied them and would remain exclusively in the hands of the foreign rulers. On the ladder of political advancement "interpreting" was to be their ceiling.

Nor was there to be nor could there be any sudden change in this way of things. The 1857 Revolt was a grand articulation

of dissent and complaint; nevertheless, it failed categorically, particularly in Bengal. Indeed, one of its major effects was a tightening of the British grip on power and a sharpening of suspicion towards the interpreting class; as highlighted, for example, by the Surendranath Banerjea¹¹. Although the British permitted, even encouraged, the formation of political associations such as the British India Association (1851) and Banerjea's India Association (1876), they did so with the pragmatic intention of creating safety valves or sounding boards for native opinion. Moreover, the government was correct in thinking that little value was attached to this exercise. The early organizations were all narrowly based and fundamentally conservative. Even the Indian National Congress (founded in 1885) was for many years little more than a forum for the formulation of prayers and petitions to the Raj.

In fact, during the late nineteenth century in Bengal, the most significant nationalist developments took place outside of the political associations. The emotional and psychological fibre of Bengali nationalism was woven by independent thinkers such as Ramakrishna (1836-86), Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1836-94). Hence, India's past cultural grandeur (whatever critical appraisal that term may demand) became the treasury for the symbolism of the emerging nationalism. How this happened, and how the legacy was used, can be clearly seen in the case of Bankim.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee is revered as a pioneer of the modern Bengali language. Although his first published novel was written in English¹², most of his writing was in Bengali. His novels, especially, attracted a wide reading audience and enjoyed immense popularity, as was also the case with his journal, *Vangadarshan*. This is, in fact, quite significant, for the Bengali literati and upper classes of the nineteenth century showed a distinct predilection for English, the language of higher education, of the law and of government. Moreover, Bengali was held in relatively low esteem, even by Bengalis¹³, and those who did choose to write in the vernacular had to bear the inevitable and meaningless likening of themselves to their English counterparts. Tagore recalls with some discomfort

It was then the fashion in Bengal to assign each man of letters a place in comparison with a supposed compeer in the West. Thus one was the Byron of Bengal, another the Emerson and so forth. I began to be styled by some the Bengali Shelley. This was insulting to Shelley and only likely to get me laughed at¹⁴.

Thus, the gulf between the *bhadralok* and the common people, already wide, was further broadened by the language distinction. Indeed, many Bengalis held themselves up to ridicule or contempt in their aping of Western ways and manners. Little wonder that, taking the lead from Bankim, men like Tagore, B. C. Pal and Aurobindo expressed an ardent *cri de coeur* for cultural self-reliance. It was hardly logical—and indeed, it was somewhat humiliating—that the idiom of a nascent nationalism should have been articulated in the language of the colonial masters.

Bankim's writings, then, made an important contribution to Indian nationalism.

His novels and essays, but chiefly his novels, awoke in the people of Bengal a rising consciousness of power, of pride in their language, in their literature, in their religion, and most of all in themselves. They began to sense that leadership in India no longer derived from the examples of foreigners, or of the dead heroes of Rajputana and Maharashtra, but was to be found in men who lived in Bengal and spoke their own language, Bengali¹⁵.

Bankim's works certainly strengthened the association between nationalism and Hinduism. The land of one's birth (*janmabhumi*), in this case *Vangabhumi* (Bengal), is identified in the most famous of his novels, *Anandamath*, with the Mother Goddess, Durga. Similarly, when talking about the notion of duty in his essay, *Dharmatattva* (or *Anushilan*)¹⁶, Bankim draws a close connection between patriotism and religion, defining service to the homeland as one of the highest aspirations of Hindu *dharma*.

Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth century, Indians were not noted for any national cohesion and national pride, and

for this shortcoming Bankim blamed history or the lack of it¹⁷. One cannot take a pride in something without first knowing it. The Greeks and the Romans wrote of their past glories; the Muslims had done the same. But the Hindu, on the surface of it, had nothing really to be proud of because he had not written it down. Niharranjan Ray's deference to Bankim in the opening chapter of *History of the Bengali People* is appropriate.

We need a history of Bengal. Otherwise Bengalis will, sooner or later no longer have an identity¹⁸.

To Bankim, then, the purpose of history was to serve the interests of the development of nationalism. In his amalgam of the notions of history, *janmabhumi* and religious duty expressed through the medium of the mother tongue, he handed on a significant legacy to Indian nationalism and nationalist historiography.

While the writings of Bankimchandra and his successors contributed to a growing awareness of, and pride in, Bengali cultural identity, it took the colonial government's arrogant assumptions of divide-and-rule to truly ignite Bengali nationalism. In 1904, the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, announced his intention to partition Bengal along religious lines, thereby effectively destroying the cultural hegemony of the Bengalis by separating the *bhadralok* elite in Calcutta from their economic base in the east, and by making those in what would be West Bengal a lingual minority in the proposed new province.

Understandably, the outcry against the partition took on a distinctively Bengali cultural expression, in many ways characterised by the songs of Tagore's *Svadesh*.

Bengal's soil, its waters, its air and its fruits -

May they be blessed, O Lord, may they be blessed.

Bengal's homes, its markets, its forests and its fields

May they be replete, O Lord, may they be replete.

The resolution of the Bengalis, their hopes, their
deeds and their speech—

May they be truthful, O Lord, may they be
truthful.

The hearts and minds of the Bengalis, and the
boys and girls of their families—
"May they all be one, O Lord, may they all be
one"¹⁹.

However, the Swadeshi Movement, as it came to be called, was hardly a representative movement of the Bengali people. For a start, it excluded the great mass of Bengali Muslims, many of whom were in favour of the partition. Secondly, while many of the common people may have benefited from the social welfare work of some of the Swadeshi organizations, the anti-partition movement was dominated by the *bhadralok*. Indeed, as Leonard Gordon points out²⁰, nearly ninety percent of the revolutionaries came from the three top castes of Bengali society—Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha—who were, collectively, little more than five percent of the total population. Furthermore, most of them were aged between sixteen and thirty. In 1908 Tagore expressed the view :

When our speakers failed in Mymensingh and other areas to win the heart of the Mussalman peasantry, they felt very indignant. They never thought for a moment that we have never given proof of our real interest in the welfare of the Mussalmans or of the common people of our country. We cannot, therefore, blame them if they are rather suspicious of our professions of goodwill. A brother does, of course, suffer for the sake of another brother, but if somebody just turns up from nowhere and introduces himself as a brother, he is not very likely to be straightaway shown into his share of the inheritance²¹.

Not only were the Muslims simply taken for granted, as Tagore implies, they were actually alienated by the overtly Hindu forms, symbols and expressions of the growing nationalist mythology. This was particularly so in the case of the militant vanguard of the Swadeshi Movement, the secret societies.

The secret societies are worth looking at in some detail, for here, in this clandestine revolutionary world, can be seen most clearly the merging of cultural and political concerns

under an aura of zealous spirituality. The training of recruits, according to Arun Chandra Guha²², included study of the *Bhagavadgita*, the Upanishads and the epics, works on *brahmacharya* and *bhaktiyoga*, the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and the lives of the various *sadhus*, *sants* and *swamis*. History too was emphasised, with special attention being given to the traditions of the Rajputs, Sikhs and Marathas. Notable individuals, such as the European nationalists, Garibaldi and Mazzini, and the Indian ideologues, R.C. Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji, were studied too. Moreover, the training had a strong moral and somewhat puritanical dimension to it. Aspirants to membership were expected to be celibate, to be satisfied with an austere diet and to wash their own clothes; they travelled barefoot and in the garb of the *sannyasi*. The nocturnal visits which they made to the cremation grounds were intended to minimise fear, and they were obliged to undergo intense physical training in order to cultivate toughness and resilience.

The social service work of the secret societies also was leavened with Hindu inspiration and values. Indeed, in all their activities their guiding principle was the ideal of *nishkama karma* of the *Bhagavadgita*, and their social service work, in particular, was inspired by Vivekananda's ideal of *seva dharma*. The higher, more abstract ideal of service to the Motherland was perceived in concrete terms in the acting out of service to her suffering people. As far as the revolutionaries were able they gave support to the poor and the victims of famine, and they nursed the sick, often at great risk to their own lives, tending the victims of cholera, typhoid and smallpox²³. The ideal of service above self was a truly noble aspect of the work of the secret societies and its inculcation into the young nationalists of a sense of caring for the common people must have done a lot to kindle in their hearts and minds a consciousness of 'folk', an awareness of a regional identity on a broader, social level than the more narrow, bookish notions of so many of the *bhadralok*. Their work must also have played some part in the development of the ideal of self-sufficiency so earnestly encouraged in the Swadeshi era by Tagore, Sister Nivedita, B. C. Pal, Satish Chandra Mukherjee,

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and others. Certainly these young revolutionaries must, in turn, have engendered a feeling of gratitude and admiration in the people whom they served. Given the extent of their charity, their selfless devotion to the Motherland and the ritual solemnity in which it was enshrouded, and the aura of martyrdom that accrued to each young terrorist who, shouting *Bande Mataram!*, ascended the gallows, an element of nobility — misplaced or not — must surely have appealed to many young men throughout the years that the secret societies were active²⁴.

Thus, in the decade or so after 1905, the religious, cultural and political paths of Indian nationalism in Bengal converged. Indeed, political extremism was more often than not inextricably entwined with religious revivalism, with many religious practitioners and teachers being involved. For example, the Vedic Sanskrit scholar, Mokshada Samadhyayee, led a political dacoity at the Changripota railway station²⁵; Nalini Gupta, who would later become the manager of the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, was a member of the Rangpur group of *Jugantar*²⁶; Swami Baladevananda Giri, a *sannyasi* and head of a monastery, 'took an unremitting interest in revolutionary activities²⁷'; Satish Chandra Mukherjee who was influential in the Barishal wing of the revolutionary movement, was a remarkable devotee and classical scholar of some note who later became a *sannyasi* under the name of Swami Prajnananda Saraswati²⁸; while the lawyer and teacher, Aswini Kumar Datta, who organized the Little Brothers of the Poor in treating the sick in Barishal, a notorious cholera district, was one of the leaders of the boycott during the Swadeshi days and was deported in 1908.

It is interesting to note the connection between political extremism and the Brahmo Samaj. Rajnarayan Basu, one time leader of the *Adi Brahmo Samaj*, was a founder, along with Nabagopal Mitra, of the *Hindu Mela* in 1867. In his later years he became a staunch defender of Hinduism (in 1872 he delivered a speech, "The Superiority of the Hindu Religion"). His nephew, Satyen, was hanged in Alipore jail, and another nephew, Jnanendra, helped found a revolutionary society in Midnapore. Krishna Kumar Mitra was himself a staunch

Brahmo as well as a loyal Congressman; he was an ardent nationalist, employing the journal *Sanjivani* to propagate his strong views, and was a leader of the Swadeshi Movement, deported in 1908. Arun Chandra Guha describes Krishna Kumar's house in Calcutta as a centre of the revolutionary movement²⁹. Ananda Mohan Basu too was a staunch Brahmo, who stressed to young men the need to prepare themselves for violent uprising³⁰. Ananda Mohan and Krishna Kumar were both from Mymensingh which, according to Arun Chandra Guha, reflected the greatest influence of the Brahmo Samaj of all the districts of east Bengal³¹. (Mymensingh, incidentally, was the home district of Niharranjan Ray). Finally, we might note Bijaykrishna Goswami, once a Brahmo but later a Vaishnava, two of whose disciples were Aswini Kumar Datta and Bepin Chandra Pal.

The Partition of Bengal was annulled in 1911, but this did not dampen extremist enthusiasm, for along with the annulment came a great blow to Bengali pride in the shifting of the capital of British India from Calcutta to New Delhi. For a hundred years Bengal had been the administrative and economic centre of the subcontinent, and thousands of high caste Bengalis had benefited from the opportunities provided by this ascendancy. Similarly, Bengal had made itself the cultural and intellectual centre of India. Bengalis took pride in the maxim "what Bengal thinks today India does tomorrow". Whether the rest of India approved of this or not, the development of Western education, the growth of an extensive press and the prosperity of the professions and the business classes were patent indication of Bengal's eminence. With the transfer of the capital, Bengali political leaders could no longer lay claim to being national leaders. They were no longer at the centre but at the periphery, and the subsequent history of Bengal up to the re-partition in 1947, was to be very much the story of a region largely turned in on itself, on its own writers and and artists, on its own political leaders.

Niharranjan Ray was one of the children of this turbulent era, born in Mymensingh on January 14, 1903. His father, Mahendrachandra, was a teacher with a noted love for learning, a man guided by strong humanitarian principles,

and a patriot fired with the spirit of the newly emerging nationalism. More particularly, Mahendrachandra was rather drawn to the ideals of the Brahmo Samaj, although he was not an initiate of that society. His brother and nephews were Brahmos, however, and Niharranjan, who lodged with them in Calcutta while studying for his M.A. degree, was in no small way influenced by their views.

Inheriting his father's patriotism and drawing literary inspiration from the writings of Bankim and Tagore, Niharranjan found an early outlet for his passions in the Anushilan Samiti³². While his involvement with this terrorist organization was only on the first level of membership³³ where little more was required of him than sympathetic concern and moral support, he did suffer slightly for the cause in that he was expelled from Mymensingh because of his Anushilan connection and forced to complete his secondary schooling in Sylhet. Probably fired by Gandhi and the Congress movement with which he had become involved, he was given leave to resign his membership of the Samiti in 1926. (He did, however, continue his association with individual members of the Samiti, and later followed some of them into the ranks of the Revolutionary Socialist Party).

Having matriculated in Sylhet, Niharranjan went to Calcutta University in 1923. There he specialised in ancient Indian history and culture, graduating with a double first. In addition he won the Mrinalini Gold Medal in 1926 for his entry, *Political History of North India, A.D. 600-900*, the Premchand Roychand Scholarship in 1928, and the Mouat Gold Medal in 1930. From 1927 to 1933 he spent time intermittently in Burma with his teacher and mentor, Professor Benimadhab Barua, studying temple architecture, and this formed the subject of his earliest published books, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma* (1933) and *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*, (1936).

In 1933 Ray travelled to Europe and took doctorates in letters and philosophy from the University of Leiden and a London diploma in librarianship. On his return to India in 1936 he obtained a position as librarian in the University of Calcutta as well as a lectureship in ancient Indian history. While in Europe he had imbibed something of the intellectual's

enthusiasm for Marx, and in Calcutta in 1940 he joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party. For a time in the late thirties he worked as literary editor of *Forward Bloc* the journal of Subhas Chandra Bose, but while his Marxist interest was to be an abiding one, his enthusiasm for Netaji and his movement was only temporary. He had been stirred by Gandhi and had taken part in the Non-cooperation Movement in 1920 and the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930. In 1942 he was jailed for his involvement in the Quit India Movement. However, as did Nehru, he turned this enforced period of idleness to constructive use, for in jail he was able to concentrate on the drafting of his *History of the Bengali People*.

Niharranjan Ray became Bagesvari Professor of Indian Art and Culture in the University of Calcutta in 1944, a post which he held until 1965. However, he also held other important and prestigious positions during that time, lecturing in Washington in 1951-52, and serving as President of the All-India Bengali Literary Conference in Lucknow in 1953 and as Tagore Professor in the University of Kerala in 1963. After he had left Calcutta University, Ray became successively Tagore Professor in the university of Baroda, visiting professor in the University of Delhi, Founder-Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Simla (a post he held from 1965-1970), Tagore Professor in Chandigarh University, and visiting professor at Tirupati. He was also Director, National Library, Calcutta and Honorary Professor, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.

But Ray's contribution to modern India was not confined to academic scholarship. He was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1957 to 1965 and went on to serve on the Government of India's Third Pay Commission from 1970 to 1973. Not surprisingly, he won numerous awards, including the Sarojini Gold Medal from the University of Calcutta in 1960, the Law Gold Medal of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1970 and, on a national level, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 and the Padmabhushan Award of the Government of India in the same year. Internationally, he was honoured with fellowships of the British Library Association, of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain, of the Royal Society of the Arts, and of the

International Association of Arts and Letters (Zurich) as well as the Asiatic Society (Calcutta).

After what was, by any standards, a most illustrious career, Niharranjan Ray died on August 30, 1981.

Clearly, Ray's life was one lived to the full, with what seemed to be almost a passion for diversity. Indeed, by his mid-thirties he had imbibed quite a variety of ideas : the liberal humanism of the Brahmo Samaj, revolutionary nationalism, the Upanishads; he was influenced by Tagore, Gandhi, Marx and, for a short time, Subhas Chandra Bose. In order to appreciate more fully the broad expanse of his writings and interests and, especially, to grasp something of the essence of the vision underlying his *History of the Bengali People*, it is important to venture some explanation of this apparent disharmony of mentors and credenda. It is significant that while he was yet young his facility for a total commitment to any cause or school of thought had become greatly strained, and that a notable elasticity would increasingly come to characterise his own identity in the realm of other thinkers and their ideas and national leaders and their aims and methods.

It would seem that it was not in the nature of the man to seek consistency at the expense of intellectual travel and discovery. Should he encounter a conflict between loyal commitment and a thirst for wider experience, the commitment would have to be diluted. There is no doubt that a commitment to, let us say, a particular cause can be noble in itself and rich in its potential achievements, but its constancy and totality must, by definition, be limiting. It is sometimes the mark of a lesser man that he can easily be labelled and defined, and perhaps the converse applies to a man of greater significance. Certainly Niharranjan Ray found it impossible to label himself.

Yet I would not call myself a Marxist as I would not describe myself as a Tagorite even, far less a Gandhian. I would not look upon any one of them as offering me a package deal for my total acceptance or total rejection²⁴.

Ray's vision of life was immense and his desire to experience and to learn was unlimited. Throughout his long intellectual

odyssey he sought to transcend barriers and to discern relationships and connections, to break down impediments and to seek broader integrities.

Thus, no prophet or 'ism' was ever broad enough to offer Ray complete refuge. Whereas he may have been culturally and intellectually stimulated by the Brahmo members of his father's family, he also needed the Anushilan Samiti for the articulation of his nationalist sentiments. Marxism and his membership of the Revolutionary Socialist Party can be seen simply as a logical extension of his liberal humanism. (Of course, on the other hand it might also be asserted that Ray's political life went through phases, with his later Congress membership of the Rajya Sabha—1957-65—putting paid to his earlier leftist or extremist dalliances). The Upanishads offered him a rich and wide *Weltanschauung*, but their applicability to history or to the times in which he lived made it necessary for him to go beyond the texts themselves. Gandhi was a charismatic, inspiring man who, as a guiding beacon in Niharranjan's life, was by no means dim, yet Ray could never accept non-violence as an absolute virtue nor the spinning-wheel as a panacea for economic backwardness. Perhaps Tagore offered him most, but in the actualities of the political development of modern India Tagore's voice often sang out of tune, and even some of his cultural ideas were later to be challenged by Ray²⁵.

So much of Niharranjan's life was sandwiched between the two partitions of Bengal; hence, it is easy to understand that much of it was inspired by nationalism. Ray was influenced by the ideals of liberal humanism upheld by his family as well as by the ideal of service to country. His recognition of the importance of his region's history follows naturally from his boyhood travels and his reverence for Bankim and Tagore. His journeying brought him into close contact with the common people, of whom he gained a knowledge more intimate than that characteristic of his fellow *bhadralok*. He found himself quite naturally caught up in the quest for regional identity reflected in the works of many of his contemporaneous scholars and artists. Indeed, his own diversity of interest was very much a response to the rich diversity that was Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Context of Niharranjan Ray's Scholarship

When Niharranjan Ray began writing, Bengali studies, in the modern scholarly sense, were nearly a hundred years old. To a large extent modern Bengali historical scholarship began as a result of European Orientalist curiosity. In 1784 Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and for the next half century and more this gave impetus and direction to the study of Indian antiquity. In particular, the Asiatic Society served to link India to the European academic tradition. Such rationalists as Gibbon, Hume and Robertson helped shape local perceptions of 'history', while the Sanskritic researches of the German scholars, Max Muller and Christian Lassen, as well as the pioneering work in archaeology and inscriptional interpretation of James Prinsep and Alexander Cunningham, provided a vigorous methodology. Another European creation, Fort William College, founded in 1800, also played an important role in helping to publish and disseminate the fruits of this early research. Nevertheless, for some decades research was handicapped by a paucity of sources; moreover, what was written was presented very much in imitation of European models and was hardly the start of any regional or vernacular school. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the enthusiasm for English culture among the urban elites of Bengal was at its height, a number of histories of Britain, Greece and Rome were compiled in Bengali.

The earliest historical works in Bengali from the nineteenth century were studies of sundry local kings. Based on meagre source material, they were quite uncritical and were characterised more by sentiment than by objectivity. As the century wore on, though, the more critical approach discerned in foreign works helped prompt a new investigation of sources in the enthusiastic quest to rediscover the 'great and glorious' in India's past. The best of the foundation for twentieth

century scholarship was laid by such writers as Akshay Kumar Datta, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (and the various contributors to *Vangadarshan*), Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Shivnath Shastri and Rabindranath Tagore.

Interest in local history continued, but the early decades of the twentieth century saw, in particular, a growth of revivalist and nationalistic sentiment, and works on the Indian National Congress, revolutionary activities in Bengal and *banglar vira*, or the heroes of the land, enjoyed some popularity. Needless to say, patriotism eclipsed scholarship.

The greatest landmark of Bengali vernacular historiography, ushering in a distinctly modern school in Bengal, was *Banglar Itihas* by Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay (1886-1930). Published in two volumes in 1915 and 1917, this work was the outcome of some twelve years of research, and constitutes the first truly comprehensive account of Bengal from earliest times to 1576. The work is recognizably historical, incorporating a wealth of detail drawn systematically from a variety of sources of the kind esteemed in orthodox Western historiography. Rakhaldas held little respect for literature as a valid source for historical writing, and rejected out of hand the genealogical materials of the Kulin tradition. On the contrary, he had a strong regard for objectivity. Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay was also an archaeologist and was accomplished in epigraphy, numismatics, palaeography and art. Thus, in addition to his *Banglar Itihas*, he was well equipped to write a number of specialist works that would be of great value to subsequent historians — *Prachin Mudra* ("Ancient Coins") (1915), *Origin of the Bengali Script* (1919), and *Palaeography of the Hathigumpha and Nanaghat Inscriptions* (1929), for example.

Not long before the publication of Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People*, three other significant books appeared. One was Sukumar Sen's work, published in 1943, on the society and culture of Bengal from the fifth to the twelfth century³⁶. It is a work notable for its literary polish, a quality Niharranjan Ray was to hold in great esteem while writing his *History*. In the same year Kshitimohan Sen published a small, well documented book on Indian culture³⁷ which sought to advance the view that it was a characteristic spirit

of toleration in Indian society that encouraged the great diversity in Indian culture; a major feature of Ray's writing is the search for syntheses. The third work was R.C. Majumdar's *Bangla Desher Itihas* ("History of the Bengali Nation") (1945), in which the author asserts the underlying nationhood and distinct ethnic and cultural identity of the Bengali people—a leitmotiv in Niharranjan's *History*. Thus, these three works all point to some of the over-riding features of Ray's *History of the Bengali People*.

While the emphasis of this discussion is on the vernacular historiography of Bengal, scholarship in English—on Bengal and on India in general—cannot be ignored, for the mind of Niharranjan Ray was influenced by it, too. Especially important among Ray's predecessors and mentors were Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, K. P. Jayaswal, R. C. Dutt, D. R. Bhandarkar and Hemchandra Raychaudhuri. All of these writers based their works on conventionally accepted, verifiable sources (documents, coins, inscriptions and the like), and were noted for their objectivity and their aim to present, quite dispassionately, 'the truth'. Of particular importance to Niharranjan Ray's *History* was the work of Prabodh Chandra Bagchi in collecting the Old Bengali *Charyapadas* and *Dohas* in Nepal.

The culmination of endeavours to write Indian history in the European mode came in 1943 in the form of the *History of Bengal*, Volume I, edited by Romesh Chandra Majumdar and published by the University of Dacca. This is a work similar in style and format to the Cambridge histories of Europe; each chapter is a self-contained essay on a particular aspect of history and written by a specialist in that field. (Niharranjan Ray, the youngest contributor to this work, wrote the chapters on sculpture and painting). The book's singular value is as a rich reservoir of factual material. However, it lacks spine in that, given its format and structure, it could not present a unified or interrelated interpretation of its subject.

As well as being heir to an extensive tradition of historical scholarship, both English and Bengali, Niharranjan drew extensively on the work of scholars in related fields such

as anthropology, linguistics, art and religion. We should now consider some of the luminaries whose work offered Ray valuable food for thought, starting with Haran Chandra Chakladar.

Very little of Chakladar's work was actually published during his lifetime, but he left behind him a great deal of notes in manuscript form as well as some papers prepared for publication. He taught at the University of Calcutta in the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture and, later, in the Anthropology Department for some twenty years before his retirement in 1937; that is, in Niharranjan's student days and in his early years as a member of the University staff. Chakladar's major work, *The Aryan Occupation of Eastern India*, was written some time before 1925³⁸. His *Social Life in Ancient India* was published in 1929³⁹ and was sub-titled "A Study in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*".

Social Life in Ancient India was an attempt to present a picture of society in the time of Vatsyayana. After some discussion on the controversy concerning the dates of Vatsyayana's life, Chakladar goes on to look at the geography and ethnography forming the context of Vatsyayana's work. He discusses caste, *ashramas*, asceticism, courtship and the various kinds of marriage; his work becomes something of a social history with his discussions on town life, economic conditions, recreation and leisure activities, arts and crafts and the status of women. In addition to the basic primary source, Chakladar made use of a wide range of inscriptions as well as such literary sources as the Brahmanas, Upanishads, Dharmasutras, Epics, *Manu Smriti*, Puranas, Vedas, *Amarakosha* and *Harshacharita*.

In *The Aryan Occupation of Eastern India* Chakladar advances the view that, despite generally held opinion to the contrary, eastern India was from earliest times a part of Vedic Aryavarta, which region he defines as the whole of northern India from the Indus to the Bay of Bengal. He asserts that *Aryan* is a term of little ethnic significance, denoting rather a man of upright character who lives in accordance with the precepts of the scriptures. As evidence he claims that the ancient hymn writers knew all of the region he defines as Aryavarta and

notes that the eastern sea was known to the *Atharvaveda*. As eastern India is clearly mentioned in the early *samhitas* and in the Brahmanas it must have been occupied by Vedic Aryans long before the composition of these works. His examination of Epic and Puranic literature leads to his claim that the Veda itself originated in the eastern region of India, and he suggests that the fauna found especially in eastern India were well known to the composers of the *Rig Veda*. Pejorative statements about eastern India in ancient literature, he claims, are later, and are the result of a loss of purity due mainly to maritime activities and popular conversions to Buddhism.

Whereas Niharranjan Ray, for example, is at pains to establish the ethnic and cultural distinctiveness of the Bengalis and asserts that Aryanization in the east was a long and gradual process, Chakladar's re-creation of the past represents an endeavour to establish the antiquity of the Bengali identity in harmony with the mainstream of Aryan civilization and culture. Whereas Chakladar was one of the earlier scholars to concentrate his attention on one specific region, rather than on India as a whole, his focus on the particular is, nevertheless, contained within the broad view of the universal. Indeed, this is the philosophical rationale of the work. While Ray drew to some extent on the tradition represented by the ideas of Chakladar, his interpretation of the Bengalis as culturally and ethnically distinct certainly seems to swim against the tide of that tradition.

However, the notion of the cultural distinctiveness of the Bengalis—central to Ray's *History of the Bengali People*—is shared by the eminent anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose. In his *Modern Bengal* (1957) he asserts the fact of Bengal's distinct civilization long before the Aryanization of eastern India, emphasising the point with the observation that Buddhism and Jainism, with their stress on noble, humanitarian ideals, developed east of the Brahmanical heartland. He cites Shashibhusan Dasgupta's belief that the unorthodox cults of eastern India formed the basis of a distinctly Bengali literature and cultural life. Bose recognizes the distinct regional cultural characteristics apparent

throughout India, and notes particularly the special value to the Bengali of rice, unstitched cloth and slippers, bare-headedness, the use of straw thatch in building, the different caste structure and the prevalence of Vaishnavism and Shaktism. Ray too emphasises such characteristics in his *History of the Bengali People*, in order to establish his assertion of the distinctiveness of pre-Aryan Bengal.

(N.K.Bose also had something of a philosophical and methodological influence on Niharranjan Ray, but this will be discussed specifically later on).

Ray's *History of the Bengali People* is significantly indebted to the pioneering of G. S. Ghurye, too. Ghurye's *Caste and Race in India*⁴⁰ was published in 1932. The work follows a chronological approach and its sources are largely literary. The first two chapters give a descriptive account of the essential characteristics of caste and caste organization, and there follows a lengthy and richly detailed historical survey of the evolution of the caste system according to a four-part periodization : the Vedic period up to c.600 B.C., the post-Vedic period into the Christian era, the early Christian era up to the seventh or eighth century, and the eighth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The work on the Vedic era is based on the early Vedic *samhitas* and the Brahmanas. The sources for the post-Vedic period are the sacred laws (Gautama, Baudhayana, Apastamba, Vasishtha and Kautilya), the Epics and the Buddhist literature. The Dharmashastras are the basis for his work on the period up to the eighth century. Not surprisingly, the last of Ghurye's four periods reflects a greater body and variety of sources : in addition to official inscriptions there are the writings of Parasara, Hemadri and Madhava, the accounts of such foreign travellers as Domingo Paes and Barbosa, and Mughal records such as those of Abul Fazl.

Prior to Ghurye much work had been done on caste in the form of data-gathering, but his was the first scholarly work to give a comprehensive, interpretive account of the historical development of caste. Chapters on caste and class are central to Ray's *History* in particular, while notions of societal stratification are integral to social history in general. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that Ray was influenced by Ghurye's sources and his methodology.

Linguistics provided another source for Niharranjan Ray's work. In this regard probably the greatest contribution was made by a contemporary of Ray, Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977). (Suniti Kumar, incidentally, was the Chairman of the committee that produced in 1978 *History and Society. Essays in Honour of Professor Niharranjan Ray*⁴¹. From 1919 to 1922 Chatterji pursued in Europe a veritable glut of learning, studying under experts in Paris and London Prakrit, Persian, Old English, Gothic, Old Irish, Sanskrit, Indo-European and Indo-Aryan philology, Indo-European linguistics, and phonetics. In 1926 he published in two volumes his renowned *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*⁴², and in 1940 he turned to the historical development of modern Hindi, publishing in 1942 a work on the links between Indo-Aryan and Hindi⁴³.

Chatterji's work gave a formal, established structure to the history of the Bengali language clarifying the operation of vowel processes; his work on phonology enhanced understanding of the relationship between the various Bengali dialects. Chatterji made valued use of material not available to his predecessors, such as Haraprasad Shastri's *Charya* songs and the manuscript of a lost work of Chandidas discovered in a village in Bankura by Basantaranjan Roy.

Scholars such as N.K.Bose, D.D.Kosambi and Niharranjan Ray all stressed the indispensable value of philology and linguistics; hence, the greatness of the contribution of S. K. Chatterji's work to the historiography of ancient India (as well as the work on Marathi of his teacher, Jules Bloch) cannot be underestimated.

Ray also made good use of the pioneering specialist work on Indian religion done in the 1940s by Nalinaksha Dutt and Shashibhusan Dasgupta and made possible largely by the efforts of Haraprasad Shastri and P.C.Bagchi.

Dutt was an expert in Buddhism, and it was, of course, in eastern India that Buddhism flourished longest. Dutt's *Early Monastic Buddhism*, a study in the life and teachings of the Buddha, was published in 1941 and his more comprehensive *Aspects of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism* was put out a little later.

Shashibhusan Dasgupta's *Obscure Religious Cults* was written in 1939 as a doctoral thesis and was published in 1946. The work seeks to examine the obscure cults at the root of old and medieval Bengali literature and takes as its subject matter, specifically, the Buddhist Sahajiya cult, the Vaishnava Sahajiya cult, the Bauls, the Nathas and the Dharma cult, and concludes with a consideration of cosmology in early literature. Dasgupta acknowledges the work done by earlier scholars, such as Shastri and Bagchi as well as M. M. Bose and Mohan Singh, but points out the inadequacy of their work, noting the need for critical and consistent interpretation of sources, understanding of the evolution and development of cult ideologies, and for the discerning of connections and relationships between the various cults. In his endeavour to make the religious cults of eastern India less obscure, the work is of great value in providing an ordered source of information and a coherent interpretation.

As has been noted, one of Niharranjan Ray's primary interests was art history. In this field, the towering figure in Calcutta in the thirties was Stella Kramrisch, a most renowned and influential interpreter of Indian art while the young Niharranjan Ray was starting out on his academic career. When Kramrisch published her *Indian Sculpture*⁴⁴ in 1933, Ray had just completed the excursion in Burma that had led to his thinking into the syncretic connection between art and the society that produces it. With perhaps the exception of *Idea and Image in Indian Art*, all of Ray's writings on the subject from *Maurya and Sunga Art* in 1945 consciously refrain from divorcing art from society. Kramrisch, on the other hand, upheld such a divorcement as something of a categorical imperative. While Niharranjan Ray saw art as an essentially human, societal expression, varying accordingly from place to place and from time to time, Stella Kramrisch cherished a concept of art entire unto itself. Yet this distinction by no means represents a diagonal opposition. Anything Ray might have said about the essentially social basis, context or vision of Indian art could not have been said without a sound fluency in the language of the technique of Indian art, and here lay his fundamental debt to Stella Kramrisch. However,

to Kramrisch art was an end in itself, while to Ray it was *an* end to the collective creative vision of a given people at a given time. Nevertheless, Ray's admiration for Kramrisch, his teacher, can be easily understood, given that his philosophy of art did not contradict hers, but merely developed in further.

Kramrisch stressed the abstract, the mystical quality of Indian art.

There is something so strong, and at the same time unique, in any work of Indian art that its 'Indianness' is felt first of all, and what it is, is seen only on second thought⁵.

While Ray tried to interpret the 'Indianness' in terms of social history, Kramrisch was obdurate in keeping her discussion confined to the realm of art as such. She talks about the 'elements of visualization':

That there are permanent qualities throughout the fabric of Indian sculpture ...will have to be shown⁶
Form is the guide and quality the sole criterion⁷.

Kramrisch recognized that there are regional differences to be discerned in the art of India prior to 200 B.C., but asserts that to delineate them would be as impossible as it would be unnecessary. The 'Indianness' of Indian art is produced by a synthesis of regional variations *and*, more importantly, similarities. ('Indianness', it may be suggested here, is a compound that Niharranjan Ray would want to break up into its elements, elements that he would describe in terms of ethno-societal import).

Kramrisch also recognized external influences on Indian art. Whereas Ray so often sought to explain these in human, historical terms, Kramrisch saw them as not so much causal as viral.

The data which these skin-deep marks afford must not, for the sake of the wider implications, be lifted and abstracted from the body to which they belong, and which makes it possible for them to be present⁸.

Whereas Ray sought to interpret Indian art in terms of the various societies in India which, through time, produced it in what he asserts is its varying form, Kramrisch postulated the idea of the 'Indian craftsman', seemingly monolithic and timeless, who conditions Indian art.

His consciousness makes him known to himself as a part of nature and his work is the form of this 'naturalism'. Its degrees and aspects vary according to the levels of his consciousness⁴⁹.

One may care to criticise Kramrisch for being somewhat tunnel-visioned in her insistence that art exists for art's sake and must be appreciated in art's terms alone, but it must be remembered that the influence of G. M. Trevelyan in Europe or Nirmal Kumar Bose and Niharranjan Ray in Bengal had yet to be felt. Writing specialist histories of apparently self-sufficient subjects (art, caste, Buddhist philosophy and so on) was still the norm in the thirties and early forties.

Yet despite the pronounced differences in approach and analysis between Kramrisch and Ray, Niharranjan held an abiding affection and admiration for his former teacher.

...I feel proud to record that it was she who opened my eyes to the magic and mystery of Indian art and inculcated in me the love and regard for the subject which I retain to this day. My perceptions were sharpened by her and whatever insights I have been able to develop in regard to this field of knowledge, have been because of the initial training she imparted to me⁵⁰.

While various scholars inspired Niharranjan with the culture of the 'great tradition', there were also those who enhanced his passion for and empathy with the Bengali folk traditions. The work of Dinesh Chandra Sen was particularly significant in the quest for Bengali regional identity, but it also provided invaluable material for the writer of social history, for from 1911 Sen wrote and lectured extensively on Bengal's cultural inheritance, concerning himself especially with folk literature but also with the Bengali *Ramayanas* and Bengali religiosity, especially Chaitanya and the Vaishnava tradition.

It is of some significance that Sen dedicated his *The Folk Literature of Bengal*⁵¹ to Sir Asutosh Mookherji for his establishment in 1917 in the recently opened post-graduate department in the University of Calcutta of two new subjects: Ancient History and Culture, and Indian Languages. Sen saw the department of Indian vernaculars as being at the van of :

...a movement that is fraught with vast possibilities for the development of Indian National Life, based on a clear consciousness of India's distinctive greatness and homogeneous cultural progress⁵².

Clearly, D. C. Sen, like many others before and after him, could easily marry culture and scholarship with nationalist sentiment.

The Folk Literature of Bengal looks at what its author claims to be the similarities between European folk-tales and Bengali ones. He sees Bengal as the source of these tales, suggesting that they found their way to Europe by means of maritime trade or the agency of gypsies, and, later, by way of Arabic translations. Clearly implicit here is the idea that Europe owes India, and particularly Bengal, a cultural debt of gratitude—an idea that many, doubtlessly, might have found nationalistically pleasing. Sen describes story-telling as an ancient profession, and in establishing its antiquity he also strikes very deep the roots of the Bengali ethos that is reflected in the tales. He also notes the relative unimportance of Brahmans, whose origins are non-Bengali. Particularly interesting in this work is the result of Sen's study of the folk-tales of the Muslims of the lower Gangetic valley. He notes the inclusion of Hindu and Buddhist deities among these tales as well as in the *mantras* recited by Muslim fakirs and physicians, and also the hymns of Lakshmi current among a class of Muslim beggars.

...I have tried to trace the continuity of this folklore and folk-wisdom current amongst Mahomedans, from a remote time when they had not yet accepted Islam but had been Buddhist or Hindus⁵³.

In itself the idea is not chauvinistic; the writer might simply be seen as propagating the notion of the homogeneity of the Bengali cultural heritage. Nevertheless, one can infer the suggestion that the mass of Bengal's Muslims—like the Europeans—are culturally indebted to the Bengali Hindu-Buddhist heritage.

Dinesh Chandra was not without some degree of almost apocalyptic vision regarding the study of Bengali culture.

I can hardly suppress a feeling of joy that inspires me in my research work at the present moment ... [A] wholehearted devotion to [the study of Bengali language and literature] was wanting in the young generation of Bengalees, and today this long felt want seems to be removed by the daily growing number of those who are wishing to take up Bengali as a subject for the M. A. examination and by the enthusiasm displayed by these earnest students in the cause of their hitherto neglected literature. They appear to me to be the heralds of a new age, that will, let us confidently hope, ere long dawn on us⁵⁴.

*Glimpses of Bengali Life*⁵⁵ was published in 1925, five years after the publication of *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, although the lectures which form its substance were delivered at the University of Calcutta in 1915, two years before the lectures which form the body of *The Folk Literature of Bengal*. *Glimpses of Bengali Life* is rather value laden. In it Sen discusses the 'purity' of domestic life and 'truthfulness and strength of character' in ancient Bengal; he looks at the ancient Bengali appreciation of nature, stressing the perennial notion of the Bengali's natural affinity for his motherland; and he describes the religiosity of a golden past and notes the Bengali reverence for such things as the sublime love between Chandidas and Rami, the assumption of *sannyas* by Chaitanya, and the unlimited devotion of the disciple to his guru as expressed in the *Song of Gorakshanatha*. Needless to say, the work is characteristically descriptive and, for the most part, it is uncritical and unanalytical.

Contemporary literature, too, provided Ray with rich inspiration and helped shape his ideas concerning what it

was that made Bengal and the Bengalis distinct. It is noteworthy that Ray grew up at a time when Bengali vernacular writing, in prose and poetry, was proliferating and breaking new ground in its naturalistic treatment of social issues. By the thirties, the writers of Bengali fiction were concerning themselves with the actual rather than the idealised condition of contemporary Bengali society.

Niharranjan also imbibed the spirit of the new wave of Bengali artists and their movement towards a school of painting that was characteristically Bengali. Prominent here was Abanindranath Tagore and his younger brother, Gaganendranath, who, while absorbing classical Indian styles and motifs together with European, Middle Eastern and East Asian elements, founded a modern school of essentially Bengali painting. Into this emergent regional school Jamini Roy (1887-1972) infused his passion for traditional Bengali folk art, and Kshitindranath Majumdar (1891-1975) interpreted classical themes and the values of Bengali Vaishnavism in an excitingly modern style. But it was Nandalal Bose (1883-1966) who not only carried on the movement set by Abanindranath but also gave it a popular identity. Nandalal's themes are by no means neo-classical but are derived from the ordinary everyday life of the common man. His interest in artisans and peasants as subjects of artistic endeavour may be said to have elevated the popular sense of the dignity of the humbler classes. His Haripura posters, for example, are clearly fired with a warmth of sympathy for the ordinary people.

However, of all the influences on Niharranjan Ray, the most profound and abiding came from Rabindranath Tagore. As a boy Niharranjan would commit to memory long passages of the Poet's verse, and later wrote two books and numerous articles on him. It was during his undergraduate days that he began a personal association with Rabindranath, having been introduced to him by his Brahmo cousin, Amal Hom Ray. Tagore had developed some admiration for Niharranjan, having been impressed by a review written by him of Edward Thompson's *Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Dramatist*⁵⁶. There may be some incidental interest in such trifles as Niharranjan's adoption of the affectations of fashion nicknamed 'Rabiyana'

and his conscious attempts to cultivate a style of handwriting similar to that of the Poet, but it must be stressed that Ray never became a blind devotee or disciple of Tagore.

In some ways the life of Tagore might be seen as an incarnate model for the scholarly endeavour that Ray was to pursue. The urge and vitality of the poet who wrote novels and plays, who composed songs and created dance-dramas, who was an essayist and lecturer, philosopher and educationalist, were an urge and vitality avidly imbibed by the young librarian who had a passion for art and its history, who would write on Buddhism and Sikhism, sociology, linguistics and archaeology, who was to publish many articles on contemporary men and affairs and who was to revolutionise the writing of the history of ancient Bengal with his *magnum opus* in 1949.

Common to both men was a syncretic perception of Indian history and culture. Niharranjan inherited from Tagore, directly or indirectly, a fervent attraction to the dynamic process of blending diverse elements, so dramatically begun to be worked out during the nineteenth century. The merging of ancient and medieval Indian cultural motifs with the social and intellectual forces of modern Europe was determining a new cultural direction for India. Despite occasional discouragements, Tagore's vision of the future was always one of hope and confidence, marked out by this new direction. Niharranjan Ray's works, too, reflect a commitment to a path to the future lit by a spirit of liberalism and enhanced by a sense of universal identity.

Tagore sang of the dignity of Man, above and irrespective of caste or class or nation. Ray notes his humanism.

Indeed, the prayers of *Naivedya* are informed by a deep social consciousness; at the same time they ring with the high and noble spiritual note of the Upanishads which is just another word for humanism of a most natural, liberal sort²⁷.

In Ray's *History of the Bengali People* the common folk, anonymous and unsung, come alive as the vital spirit of ancient Bengal infusing hope and value into modern and future Bengal.

In noting the influence on Tagore of Kabir, of Sufism and of Vaishnavism⁸, we are reminded of the simple village folk origins of these grand trends in Indian culture. Neither Tagore nor Ray could be said to have been a son of the soil—their bhadralok backgrounds are all too obvious—yet both shared an abiding love for the village, albeit at times a somewhat idealised one. Ray wrote

...Tagore never lost contact with the Indian masses. He deeply loved Bengal's villages and their people, and knew them with an intimacy which increased with the years. During a most creative period, one of the longest, he lived among them, knew the bitter poverty and degradation they suffered, and also the eternal aspirations enshrined in their poetry, ritual and art⁹.

Given his own youthful years of wanderlust¹⁰ Ray clearly shared this love, and his profound affection for the common village folk of Bengal is manifest in the pages of his *History of the Bengali People*.

Neither man was unusual in maintaining an unshakeable belief in India's freedom. Rabindranath shared with his brother, Jyotirindranath, and Rajnarayan Basu membership of a secret society, the *Sanjivani Sabha*—a romantic and innocuous expression of patriotism, no doubt, but it formed the basis for his "passionate concern in his nation's freedom"¹¹. He composed the inspirational *Swadesh* song collection and was recognized as a figurehead of the Swadeshi Movement. Nevertheless, it was impossible for Tagore to exclude India, in a spirit of fervent nationalism, from the swelling tide of international cultural, intellectual and technological change. As Ray points out ¹² Tagore's vision of India's freedom took on a universal perspective which gave balanced importance to two aspects of nationalism : that which is forward-looking and internationally cooperative, and that which draws its inspiration, pride and identity from the past. Each must be tempered by the other. In most of his works Ray was obliged to come to grips with the fact of invasion or mass immigration and consequent ethnic diversity in India throughout the ages : whether in regard to art, religion or social history, he always concerned himself with the task of identifying

syntheses, the trends towards unity in this diversity. In that poem from *Gitanjali* to which Niharranjan refers at the opening of his chapter on the origins of Bengali history⁶³, Tagore refers to a salient characteristic of Indian history : throughout the ages India has been a meeting-place of many peoples and cultures. Indeed, the intermingling and blending of various cultures has been one of the dominant features of Indian history; to know India through the ages is to seek to discern the social and cultural syntheses that have been worked out in that land.

One of the important features of nationalism is the extent to which the past can be used to animate and give inspiration to the present. In *Bharatvarsher Itihaser Dhara*⁶⁴ Tagore asserts that the ideological value of the *Mahabharata* is of deep historical significance. Although the epic is not history in the western sense of the word, it certainly does reveal a rich picture of the mind and soul of ancient India. Tagore's reverence for the *Mahabharata* as essence of the cultural make-up of the Indian people is echoed by Niharranjan Ray in a lecture, *Myth and Reality in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata*⁶⁵ delivered in 1976. Admitting that the ancient bardic idea of *itihasa* is not to be confused with the modern concept of history, Ray asserts that the vision and the idealism embodied in *itihasa* do indeed have a rightful place in the history of the Indian people. The stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are

...woven into the very texture of India's life and culture, and are thus an important and inalienable part of the lives of countless millions of people of this land, and hence an essential fact of Indian history, even from the point of view of the modern concept of history⁶⁶.

(Of course, it may well be argued that such 'essential facts of Indian history' are really only those which substantiate an essentialist concept of history.)

While Niharranjan Ray's philosophy of history is discussed at some length in the next chapter, it is, at this stage, worth considering a little further the thinking of Tagore that Niharranjan came to share.

Tagore was opposed to the dynastic approach to history and to the study of the past from a political standpoint, declaring the essence of life and culture to lie in social history. So much history as defined in political or dynastic terms is the story of conflict and disorder. History does reveal, however, unity and harmony, and it should be the task of the historian to discern such integration and coherence. Whereas the historical works of Niharranjan Ray do not ignore conflict and disorder (which are, like them or not, facts of history), his non-specialist, non-categorical methodology itself necessitates the bringing together of the currents of history into a rational perspective.

Historians of more orthodox Western schools might criticise Niharranjan Ray for the kinds of sources on which he has based his historical writings. Many who regard documents as the only truly respectable source of historical knowledge would regard with some suspicion Niharranjan's employment of sculpture and poetry, for example, as mines of information. Tagore, however, stressed the value of the folk culture and the traditions of the people, their fairs, their pilgrimages and the like as legitimate sources of historical study. Ray writes

Even for the earliest periods, the study of the creative arts and literature, of the thoughts and ideas of the intellectual class as much as the unlettered ordinary folk of those periods revealed, he thought, a more authentic picture of the past than was to be found through the study of what was professionally called documents⁶⁷.

Tagore notes the negative forces in history that bring about periodic disorder and disintegration as being such things as casteism, narrowness, parochialism, greed and the like.

The enemies of a country and its people, Tagore seems to have argued, always lie in ambush within its own body-social, and not outside⁶⁸.

In many of the pages of *History of the Bengali People*—for example, the discussion of the Anarchy of the seventh and eighth centuries, the assessment of the Senas, the explanation of early Muslim conquests—Ray is careful to show these

negative forces at work in history. His last chapter is a persuasive warning of their perennial nature. A major lesson of history, he once said, is that

...a society's health, vigour and promise for further meaningful growth depends on the extent it provides scope for innovation and experiment, for encouraging creative non-conformist and protestant attitudes and approaches⁹.

Clearly, Ray gained much from Tagore. As a boy he drew literary enrichment from him; as a young man he was encouraged to extend his vision and to diversify his interests. Tagore helped inspire in Niharranjan a love of country and a reverence for its history and culture. He intensified Ray's humanism and his respect for the simple village life of the Indian masses, and encouraged his syncretic perceptions of history and culture along with his urge to write social rather than dynastic history.

On many occasions Ray aimed to make it clear that his writing contained little if any new substance, and he was quite open in acknowledging his debt to the work of earlier scholars. The seed-time of his own creativity came at a rich period in Bengal's intellectual history. The influence of European scholarship had been established, and a curiosity for the Bengali past and its culture had been given free rein. Particularly important specialist studies had been done in a number of areas, and Ray's work was well founded on a wealth of recently gained knowledge in epigraphy, anthropology, sociology, archaeology, religion, linguistics and the arts. Moreover, he was willingly picked up by the tide swelling towards a discovery of a greater Bengali identity, and his great *History of the Bengali People* would be a monumental achievement in the articulation of that identity.

Niharranjan Ray's Philosophy of History

Niharranjan Ray was a prolific writer. The bibliography in the festschrift, *History and Society*, lists seventy essays, articles and addresses published in English and thirty six in Bengali, as well as fourteen books in English and seven in Bengali. Moreover, Ray was a true polymath. A general overview of his many publications would reveal as subject matter ancient Indian political history, Indian demography, art, architecture, iconography and aesthetics; anthropology and ethnography; urban history; epigraphy; Burmese temples; the Indian influence in southeast Asia; Indian religion and, particularly, the Upanishads, Buddhism and Sikhism; the Indian epics and literary history and criticism; contemporary Indian politics and society; Indian nationalism; and critical studies of Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose.

The variety, as such, is impressive and might, on the face of it, suggest the unconnected meanderings of a talented dilettante. Yet whatever specialization might be suggested from a reading of the diversity of titles is only an apparent one, for implicit in most of Ray's writing is the endeavour to show particular aspects of human creativity in a broad social perspective.

Many would argue, with justifiable conviction, that the pinnacle of Niharranjan Ray's writing is his *History of the Bengali People*. This great work is discussed specifically in the next chapter, and it would seem appropriate at this stage that a context for it should be offered, a context of works from before and after its publication. Thus, this chapter seeks to examine Ray's vision of history as he expressed it in various works at different stages of his life.

We should look first at Ray's ideas on the history of art. These warrant primary consideration because the integrationist methodology conceived during his 'Burmese days' and basic to so much of his writing was first clearly articulated in *Maurya and Sunga Art* (1945) while Ray was

still writing his *History of the Bengali People*. This methodology, so well illustrated by most of his works on art, came to permeate the bulk of his output. Actually, one would not be far wide of the mark in describing all Ray's work as 'social history', given its syncretic interpretation within the bounds of chronology.

It is of some interest that after *Brahmanical Gods in Burma* (1933) Ray's next important writing on art should appear in the traditionalist Dacca University *History of Bengal* (1943). His writing here is generally art history and criticism in the traditional vein, but there is significance in that it foreshadows to some extent the integrationist approach of *Maurya and Sunga Art*, which appeared two years later, and on a much grander scale in *History of the Bengali People*, which was published six years later. Of particular interest is what Ray has to say about the terracotta works of Paharpur. He notes the popular nature of this art, recognizing in it a village folk inspiration clearly derived from the everyday life of the rural people. Whereas interest in Paharpur from a simply artistic point of view is satisfied here, Niharranjan cannot help seeing a further interest :

...these plaques give us a true insight into the real social life of the people of Bengal in those days. We can visualize through them how the common people lived their lives away from the courts and aristocratic environments, and we can catch a glimpse of the social and thought context of the ordinary men⁷⁰.

In *History of the Bengali People* Niharranjan Ray was to make abundantly clear the connection between art and political realities. It is, indeed, characteristic of his philosophy that art is profoundly affected by social and political forces. As we shall see, he makes much in his *History of the Bengali People* of the social and cultural ramifications of the Pala Dynasty being Buddhist and the Sena Dynasty being orthodox Brahmanical, one such major ramification being seen in changes in artistic style brought about by a change in dynasty. In the Dacca *History* he points towards this approach to interpretation.

[The Senas] seem to have developed a rather pompous and luxuriant court-life and with it a highly sophisticated and high-brow aesthetic taste, that delighted in over-sensitiveness of form and gestures, a sensuous worldliness and meticulous details of ornamentation. This is reflected in the high-flown and richly ornamental Sanskrit that developed in the Sena court as well as in the art of the period⁷¹.

It is in *Maurya and Sunga Art* that the earliest attempts may be seen in Niharranjan Ray's work to present an integrated interpretation of his subject. As an art historian, Ray did not see art in a vacuum, but as a reflection of the inter-connection of many facets of the human experience, moulded, largely, by social and religious forces. (The foundation of this approach had been laid in Burma, where he carried out extensive research into Burmese temple architecture and its concomitant cultural history. This experience intensified Niharranjan's fascination for art as a social expression and set off the development of his syncretic thinking on art history.) In *Maurya and Sunga Art* Niharranjan claims to have

...introduced a broadly sociological approach to the study of art and art history, integrating it with considerations of aesthetic, ideological, archaeological and iconographic approaches⁷².

In the Preface to the first edition of *Maurya and Sunga Art* Niharranjan represents his work as being fresh only in the interpretive sense, in that his aim was to appreciate art in a broader context than had been acceptable to art historians of India previously. He was quite explicit about the necessity to integrate studies of art with what he saw to be essentially allied or kindred studies : the social background, the political circumstances, the contemporary intellectual trends, ethnicity, the prevailing values and traditions, and the pervasive applicability of archaeology. In *Maurya and Sunga Art* he wrote that his method was sociological and noted that he had

...tried to fix [the place of the Maurya and Sunga periods] not only in the history of Indian art but in the history of Indian life as well. This, as far as I know, has not hitherto been attempted⁷³.

In *An Approach to Indian Art*⁷⁴ published in 1974, the integrationist view of art history again is central. In the Preface, Ray notes that the objects of Indian art are worthy of study as art for the sake of art, and that they are certainly valuable for the study of something much greater.

...these objects reflect social mores and moods, ideas and patterns of behaviour, etc., of given times and spaces as much as they do the various stages of the evolution of formal values and techniques of making objects of art⁷⁵.

Another theme looked at in *An Approach to Indian Art*, which is revealed in its title, concerns the parameters of an approach. Ray notes the fact that approaches to the study of the Indian cultural tradition had been very largely conditioned by European values and methodology. For example, it was common to periodise Indian art history dynastically, as was the case with political history. Although Ray asserts elsewhere the often essential role of a dynasty in the formulation of artistic expression, he points out that such periodization is generally irrational and misleading, as dynastic identification obscures vital social and formal analyses of art. He goes on to underline the essentially social nature of art as well as the fact that the greatest of the monuments of ancient India reflect in no way the tastes, ideologies or values of any royal patron. It is misleading, then, to suppose that art is dynastically determined.

Ray recognizes, however, the argument that art has an essential economic basis which is state-dependent. Overtly, great art is often found to thrive on the patronage of the state, but again it is erroneous to separate state from society as a whole. The 'establishment'—king, nobility, wealthy landholders and merchants—also included the organized religions, which had substantial financial interests of their own. This establishment was primarily concerned with the

maintenance of the existing social order, the core of which was religion. Thus,

...it was in the nature of things that art should be a most effective exponent of religion⁶.

It is, indeed, easy to see religion as the dominant motif in Indian art, but to some extent this is due to the nineteenth century European methodology in Indological scholarship, an approach that was piecemeal and fragmentary. According to Niharranjan this scholarship created a number of stereotyped images of India, only loosely connected with one another, the establishment of which brought about a distorted perspective in the perception of Indian culture. He takes issue with Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (to whom the book is dedicated) for his contribution to the distorted perspective emanating from his underlying assumption that Indian art is based in religion and that it is the articulation of the intellectual and the transcendental. As Coomaraswamy's interpretation of Indian art had been religiously conditioned, his emphasis was too frequently on the

... literary, religious, symbolical and metaphysical content of Indian art at the expense of considerations of important imaginative and aesthetic questions, problems of artistic form and its evolution and the human and social context of art⁷.

Of course, the religious aspect of Indian art cannot be ignored, but what is its proper perspective? Ray's basic perception in this regard was of the essential sociality of Indian religion. He reminds us of the integral place of the temple in Indian social life—market centre, public forum, communal bank, treasury, even fort—and argues that it was, naturally, an institution of cultural focus being the communal centre for the visual and performing arts. He describes the several stages in the architectural evolution of the Buddhist *chaitya-viraha* as being responses to social and economic needs, and makes it quite clear that the Buddhist religious life was inextricably involved in the life of the greater society. Thus, art history as it applies to the temple and the

chaitya-virahas has to be subsumed in social history. The limitations of the definitions of religion can serve only to narrow a true perception of art. To stress, however, that Indian art is not self-contained and conditioned by religion is by no means to deny the religiosity of Indian art, but rather to give it a richer interpretation based on a broader, truer perspective provided by a concern for accurate historical method. Thus, in a sense, Niharranjan's difference of approach marked the beginning of a meaningful critique of Orientalism.

The vast artistic product of ancient India suggests that art was vital in the lives of the people and that, along with literature and the performing arts, it fulfilled a social need. It also sought to be the major medium of popular education, exploited by Hinduism and by the Buddhist and Jaina fraternities as well. But art has a social purpose even beyond this, and Ray argued that the role of the artist was to provide an elevation for humanity, to provide a moral uplift in society. Religion, in his view, became a vital aspect of art in the realization of the marriage of social needs with moral aspirations.

Social and moral values in their fundamental human universals was, indeed, the essence of social content, and they are the artist's main concern ⁷⁸.

Indian mythology and iconography, founded in anthropomorphism, assume for the gods themselves a societal nature; they interact with humankind at all levels of society on planes both mundane and divine, and they are known, characteristically, to concern themselves with domestic and familial affairs. Hence, Ray's quest to discern harmony and integration in art history is further enhanced.

Art's function is to portray in perceptible form the totality of human experience, an experience that is widely diverse, but by no means fragmented and categorised. In a much later paper⁷⁹ Niharranjan wrote of religion being "the basic motivation in life" in ancient and medieval societies, thus giving to art its essentially religious thematic content. In *Indian Historiography. An Enquiry*⁸⁰ Ray speaks of the

essentially social thrust of the term *dharma* which is implicit to an understanding of the religiosity of Indian art. Religion, he argues in *An Approach to Indian Art*⁸¹, is itself a social institution and reflects the various mores, values and customs of the society that gives expression to it. Thus, the religious nature of art—indeed, art itself—can only be fully understood in the fullness of the total historical perspective.

In other words, these works of art articulate the collective will and psyche, ideas and ideologies, tastes and preferences etc. of the people subscribing to the socio-religious creed or creeds which these are concerned with⁸².

*Mughal Court Painting*⁸³ was published in 1975. Consistent with his earliest writings on the subject is the view that Mughal painting, although characteristically a court art, does have a broad historical context, and can only be seen fully in the light of the historical circumstances in which it was nurtured. Niharranjan focuses the reader's attention on the essential features of the political and ethnic background of the Mughal period and its salient ideological, philosophical and religious expression. As well, he shows characteristic concern for the human factor.

This essay assumes that art is a social activity which is, to a good extent, conditioned by the social situation of the time and space it belongs to ...⁸⁴

It is significant that art should not be seen as a means of illuminating the greatness of, say, Humayun, Akbar or Jahangir, but that the human notables are examined in order to understand more fully the art of their times which, in turn, reflects the society that produced it. The consideration of the leading figures is particularly relevant here, for Mughal art—akin, as Ray points out, to Maurya art in this sense—is somewhat removed from the tradition of the broader community. The court itself came to develop its own form and style, its thematic content drawn from its own history of Muslim life in India, its own scope and its own peculiar vivacity. And it is the court that gives this art its “unified ideological control”⁸⁵.

It is a not infrequent misconception that the Mughal period was a 'foreign' period. The government in its highest echelons may have been non-Hindu, but it was hardly non-Indian, and neither were the culture and the society that evolved during that period. Ray takes care to point out that by the time of Akbar, Islam had been in India for some three hundred years and had become well absorbed into Indian society. Many Muslims had been Hindu converts, so bringing to Islam alien yet unavoidable social and cultural elements. At various social levels Hindus and Muslims were brought together by mutual economic interests, and Hindus were involved in the administration. On the spiritual level Ray sees Sufism as being something of a bridge between the two religions.

Mughal court painting from the days of Akbar onwards thus turned out to be a human document recording the consciousness of the social forces that were contemporaneously at work in India⁶⁶.

Characteristically, Niharranjan is careful to note the workings out of syntheses in the evolution of Mughal culture. He observes that Akbar in particular

...wanted to build the superstructure of a well-blended Hindvi culture in which indigenous and foreign, Hindu and Muslim components would all have their roles to play⁶⁷.

and he sees that Mughal painting was an articulation of this cultural synthesis.

Mughal Court Painting, then, reflects several of the characteristics of the social, integrationist philosophy basic to Ray's scholarship. Foremost is an unwillingness to separate out any individual aspect of human endeavour from its broader socio-cultural context. Art history is embraced in the greater perspective of social history. Thus, the methodological synthesis articulated as early as *Maurya and Sunga Art* and developed so remarkably in *History of the Bengali People* is continued in *Mughal Court Painting*.

Thus, the salient feature of Niharranjan Ray's writings on art is a social one. He sees art history as being embraced

by social history, and while religion is prominent in Indian art, it, too, comes under the societal umbrella. There is a constant endeavour to enliven his art history with 'people', an endeavour that is not always fully successful, given the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture. With the notable exception of his writings on the Paharpur Temple, his work offers no real art 'history from the bottom'. Finally, we should note the integrationist or syncretic method as characteristic of Ray's writings on art history as much as it is of his writings on everything else.

In the final analysis, then, Niharranjan Ray sees all history as social history. Given that no one aspect of human endeavour can have full significance in total isolation from other aspects, history must be broad in outlook and syncretic in method. Just as art must be interpreted in the light of the total society in or by which it is produced, so must politics, religion, economics or even biography.

For instance, Niharranjan wrote two books on Rabindranath Tagore : one in Bengali, *Ravindra Sahityer Bhumika* ('An Introduction to the Literature of Tagore') (1941), and one in English, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning *An Artist in Life* (1967). Both works are marked by the syncretic method. Recognizing that the intellect, values and behaviour of the individual are to a large extent conditioned by social forces working within the process of history, Ray asserts the necessity to work within a socio-historical framework. Although the emphasis here is on one man, the interpretation of the significance of that one man is worked out through a much broader temporal and spatial context. It is not just the period of Tagore's life that Niharranjan is concerned with, for the Poet inherited and was significantly conditioned by the life and culture of ancient and medieval times; nor is it Bengal, or India, that defines the spatial limits of Niharranjan's context, for Tagore was very much a man of the world at large, who readily accepted as part of his own cultural identity all that appealed as good and beautiful from other countries in Asia and from Europe. Tagore's vast and diverse output was so very much an articulation of a life that was in every way

a vibrant and urgent response to the historical progression of the world in which he lived. To Niharranjan, the syncretic approach was essential in putting that response into a meaningful perspective.

As Ray applied the syncretic method to an individual, he found it equally applicable to the study of a particular community and its development in the gradual swell of a religious movement. For example, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society*²⁸, published in 1970, focuses on the syntheses that evolved among the various religious reform movements of the fifteenth century and examines the integration of those syntheses with contemporary political and social developments.

The book may seem, by its title, to be a somewhat narrow work. Indeed, it has very little at all to say about seven of the Sikh gurus, and hardly much more to say about the Sikh community in a sociological sense. The book is, rather, a 'social analysis' of the Sikh movement, an interpretation of the many and discrete forces that led to the emergence of Sikhism and fostered its development up into the nineteenth century. It reveals as effectively as any of Niharranjan's works the syncretic endeavour in a widely embracing context.

The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society offers a number of features that had come to be regarded as germane to the scholarship of Niharranjan Ray, notably his endeavour to draw links between various historical planes, especially the political and the religious, and to discern social significance from that; his syncretic perception of causality, in which, in this case, the emergence of Sikhism is seen as part of the general *bhakta* and *sant* tradition; and the consequential interpretation of social and religious integrations.

While his work on Sikhism was very much the concern of an Indian scholar about essentially Indian history, Ray was also concerned about Indian history as it was interpreted by European scholars and put into the broader context of 'Asia' or 'Orientalism'.

The problem of Western preconceptions is dealt with in *The Orient, Orientalism and Orientalia. The East and the West*

in *Indian History* (1980)⁸⁹. While certain qualitative features peculiar to Indian history may have been ignored in the attempt to make the periodization of Indian history correspond to that of the history of Europe, the interpretation of Indian history, according to Niharranjan Ray, has been somewhat blurred by various preconceptions imposed on the study of Indology by certain European scholars. Throughout the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, Ray asserts, India had been ill-interpreted and misunderstood, due very largely to the subjective endeavours of the European Orientalists who sought to rediscover India through a diversity of essentially literary sources whose interconnections were at best vaguely perceived and often not understood at all. There was, Ray points out, merely negligible effort to corroborate literary material with more empirical historical sources and with archaeology. From these beginnings in the study of Indology certain stereotyped images of India emerged. Ray cites the India of great opulence, romantic splendour and epic heroism; the India of idyllic loveliness and its people of deep religiosity; and the mysterious and exotic India of all manner of esoteric and mystical holy men. What the Orientalists lacked was an accurate historical perspective. It was too easy for them to assert the universal from the particular without carefully trying to correlate the various aspects of particular interest.

Out of the Orientalist endeavour there developed the notion of the Changeless East, a notion unacceptable to Ray. In *The Orient, Orientalism and Orientalia* he cites various instances of change in Indian history (the introduction of iron, the rise of protestant religions, nomadic invasions, foreign trade) to nearly debunk the misconception. However, while there was always change in Indian society, it was within the generally unchanging structural framework of the caste system. It was this structural solidity that prompted Marx to talk about the unchanging mode of production in India. Of course, the Orientalists were not concerned with Marxian principles; their concept of change was based on the historical experience of Europe from about the fifteenth

century onward. Ray points out that to compare India with this dramatically changing European world, so to assert a 'changelessness', is quite unfair; it would have been more to the point to compare ancient and medieval India with pre-sixteenth century Europe.

I cannot but feel therefore that European (or Western) Orientalists' characterization of Indian society as 'unchanging' is a patronising one, born of a consciousness of superiority and based on wrong historical premises ⁹⁰.

Throughout his work Niharranjan Ray depicted historical progression as being the dialectical process of conflict and synthetisation. Historical regression, or stagnation, consists in the inverse of this dialectic. We shall now look briefly at Ray's thinking about the negative forces in history.

In *Nationalism in India* (1973)⁹¹ Ray notes the facility of Indian society in the pre-Muslim era to absorb foreign ethnic, religious and cultural elements, while the same facility did not seem to exist in the (conventionally-regarded) medieval period. Niharranjan concedes that blame might be laid at the feet of the aggressive Muslim invaders, but points out that, as time passed, Hindus and Sikhs as well would have to take their share of censure for the growing strength of disintegrating forces. Given the doctrinaire and uncompromising nature of Islam and the caste structure of Hindu society, some genuine form of integration embracing the broader society would have been very difficult to accomplish. Nevertheless, Niharranjan does identify certain syncretic trends in the history of Hindu-Muslim relations, which may be seen on two levels. On the lower social level Hindu and Muslim were frequently brought together by the common bond of poverty. On the upper level there was a political recognition of the need for cooperation between Hindu and Muslim, and, despite occasional conflict, such artifices as matrimonial alliances helped bring about the development of a composite culture, at least outwardly, in the upper strata of Hindu and Muslim society. Ray notes, however, that this culture was never very deep or extensive.

He also notes the proselytising vigour of the Muslims and the high-caste aloofness of the Hindus; the irony of this is that this synthesis in turn came to be an agent of further communalist disintegration.

The argument seeks to establish that nineteenth century Indian culture and tradition and, ultimately, Indian nationalism were, in essence, Hindu. In addition to the encouragement of fervent sectarianism by the Hindu Mela and the growth of secret societies, Ray notes the contributions of Aurobindo, Bankim Chandra and Tilak, regarding these men as being not really anti-Muslim, though expressing a Hindu consciousness that could not have been meaningful or inviting to the Muslims. He probably treats these three too kindly. These men, in fact, were never seen to display the idealism of a nationalism based primarily on communal blending, preferring as they did to flaunt the past glories of the numerically dominant community. This served to highlight differences, and to alienate the Muslim community. Niharranjan also treats Syed Ahmed Khan less critically than he might, stressing Syed's concern—misconceived, Ray holds—for friendliness on the social level between Hindus and Muslims despite the necessity, as Syed would have it, for political and economic distinctiveness. Syed's contribution to Muslim separatism is conveniently glossed over.

In the light of modern India's inheritance of much that remains medieval as well as its communal and sectarian disseveration, it is well worth considering an essay written near the end of Niharranjan's life. *A Reassessment of the Nineteenth Century Regeneration*².

By contrast to his *History of the Bengali People* this essay concerns itself with history from the top, taking for its focus the leaders of society and showing an interest in the common people more by indirect reference than by primary discussion. The attempt to discern syntheses characterises this work as much as previous ones, but here the interest is more in a synthesis that is yet to be worked out—a dream sequence in Bengali history that is yet to be fulfilled. In dialectical terms his focus is on the antithesis, for A

Ressessment is largely a study in those forces that seek to impede progress and the workings out of syntheses. Ray perceives the 'Bengal Renaissance' to have been limited in its influence for national good, and aims to explain that this had to be the case given the reality of certain antithetical forces in nineteenth century history.

The leaders of the Regeneration (as Ray calls the 'Renaissance') were but a "handful" and Ray cites some eleven names of those who made up the cultural "dominant minority" over a span of about a hundred years—the men of "moral courage and foresight"²⁸ who tried to turn Indian society away from medievalism and point it in the direction of modernism. He illustrates this intended redirection by citing the example of the reverence for reason and liberal humanism (*udara manavadharma*) of Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Datta in challenging the dominance of superstition and scriptural authoritarianism. Indeed, all these modernizers faced a common struggle against the entrenched power of tradition and Hindu orthodoxy on the one hand and the seeming immutability of colonialist administration on the other. Nevertheless, they were not part of a movement in any organized sense.

Societally, too, the 'handful' remained part of an antithesis rather than a synthesis in that they never took on the leadership of a mass following or urged the formation of any new social class. Niharranjan asserts that they did not understand the intricacies of imperialist rule and colonialist economics and so were unable to accelerate a modernizing social revolution through the agency of a new class ²⁹. Indeed, Ray argues that significant transformation in societal structures is yet to occur in India.

Another irony lies in the fact that while the British presence in Bengal was initially the major source of the Regeneration, the indomitable imperialist power and its uncompromising and exploitative economic policies led that same British presence to be also a major source of frustration. While there remained room within colonialism to pursue, to some extent, liberality, new learning and progressive morality, a growing conflict developed between the interests

of Bengali regeneration and the interests of British imperialism.

The strongest opposition to regeneration in the sense of social reform and modernization came, however, from within Indian society itself, and Niharranjan discusses the two parties who voiced this antipathy : the growing urban middle class, and the representatives of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism. Like the regenerators, the emerging urban *nouveaux riches* took inspiration from Western education, but their economic interests were to be protected by the continuance of social, political and cultural conservatism. Even stronger was the power of tradition, whose spokesmen and upholders are described by Ray as conservative men of narrow, backward vision. He strongly declares his antipathy to such organizations as the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh and the Janasangh as well as to their "reactionary" leaders.

Ray sees both these parties — the bourgeois and the orthodox—as being agents of antithesis or disintegration as well as stalwarts of tradition and orthodoxy, opposed to progress and reform. The growing middle class promoted class distinction whereby power and privilege would be concentrated into the hands of a few English-speaking, Western-educated, urban elites. The Brahmanical Hindu 'apologists' promoted communalism.

As *History of the Bengali People* ends with the antithesis of Bengal's ancient period, that maelstrom of invasion, terror and plunder that would, in time, work itself out into the synthesis of Mughal India, so does *Reassessment* end with a brief, but poignant, recognition of the fact of communal disintegration in India, Ray has dealt with Hindu-Muslim separatism elsewhere⁹⁵; a somewhat cursory consideration is sufficient for his purpose here. The climactic focus of the essay is the Jamalpur riot of 1907. Preceding this Ray notes the withdrawal of Muslims from the public arena in the light of the British ascendancy and lists some of the organizations reflecting Muslim separatism founded towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Jamalpur riot (in Niharranjan's native Mymensingh, when he was four years

old) was simply one of many, but Ray's point here is to illustrate the more general negative forces at work in Bengal's history. The Swadeshi Movement had been a show of unity, yet it was a facade that was unable to conceal the deep-rooted antipathies that had yet to find some conciliation. Conflict between imperialist ruler and colonialist subject, between educated and prosperous elite and illiterate and oppressed masses, between the Hindu community and the numerically large and cohesive Muslim community, and between the apostles of a new, modern society and the adherents of a millenia-old tradition of scriptural authoritarianism upholding a system of institutionalised inequality and exploitation—such was the basic feature of the Calcutta which, at the end of his essay, Ray sees Tagore abandoning for Shantiniketan in 1907.

Tagore might be accused of being a social and political ostrich, but that would be missing the point. Like *History of the Bengali People, Reassessment*, given the literary bent of its author, ends somewhat symbolically. Tagore's leaving Calcutta for Shantiniketan is not so much a historical statement as a historical metaphor. Tagore so clearly represents the spirit of the renaissance. He was a universalist, a liberal humanist, staunchly antithetic to those forces—reaction, privilege, caste, communalism and the like—that would stifle the individual human spirit. The spirit of the regeneration would well have been the spirit, in Niharranjan's eyes, of a new and grand synthesis in Indian history, but for the urge of reaction that was still strong enough to keep buoyant the forces of antithesis.

At the beginning of the essay Niharranjan is careful to establish that the 'Bengal renaissance' was not an Indian version of what had occurred some centuries earlier in Europe. His 'reassessment' of the 'regeneration' is that it cannot be hailed as an age of cultural splendour. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century is commonly seen in that light, the ideas and expressions of its leading characters being celebrated as ends in themselves. By no means does Niharranjan seek to minimise the greatness of these characters; rather, he concerns himself with the question,

what is the historical value of it all? If one looks at the regeneration as liberalism for the sake of liberalism, one has one's answer. Ray, however, tries to see the regeneration in a broader perspective than allowed by accepted time definitions, as well as in a broader social perspective that would make the masses relevant to cultural and social progress. It is strange, then, that Tagore, often dubbed the 'Man of the Renaissance', and on whom Ray has written so much, should not feature prominently and centrally in this perspective. While Tagore retreated to Shantiniketan in 1907, he did not cease to be creative—or regenerative—for the remaining decades of his life. Thus, to argue that the cultural and intellectual heights reached in the nineteenth century have in the historical long-run been to no avail, without considering the last decades of Tagore (the most obvious bridge between the regeneration and the present) might seem to be truncating the evidence.

Niharranjan does, indeed, rejoice in the heights reached by his nineteenth century forebears. More than a little poignant, then, is the implication throughout the essay of the disappointment of a man, nearing the end of his life, in the fact that those heights of liberal humanism still have not become guiding beacons for the mass of India's people.

Niharranjan Ray's philosophy of history as we have examined it so far is essentially Indian in its applicability. As his philosophy of history reaches beyond any special subject to a more general realm, its 'Indianness' remains central. Ray was an innovative scholar in that he believed that Indian history could be written with an Indian, as distinct from European, frame of reference. As Niharranjan aimed to broaden the vision of the historian methodologically, he also aimed to extend the perimeters within which history might be interpreted to allow for the study of Indian history without necessary deference to values and structures essential to Western historiography.

As a legatee of the Bengali Renaissance, Niharranjan Ray readily acknowledged the contribution to modern Indian historiography of European scholarship.

...this hertiage has made us more conscious of what is understood as history in modern times; it has also made us more conscious of the social purpose of history⁹⁶.

However, Ray questions whether this historiography is really appropriate as a model for the writing of Indian history. He asserts that Indian historiography by the early twentieth century was conditioned largely by the notion of *Pax Romana cum Pax Britannica* and became cast in the same mould of kings and emperors and dynasties. Yet it is absurd, he argues, to suggest that the historiographical concepts relevant to the history of the British Empire are necessarily relevant to the history of India. Western historiography, especially that which focuses on political history, must, when applied to India, produce a history merely of a tiny—though dominant—urban minority, and so ignore the vast majority of the Indian people. Thus, there is a great range of questions about life in ancient and medieval India that Western historiography would leave unanswered.

The 'conflict of historiographical interests' between Western and Indian methodologies can be traced back at least to the first half of the nineteenth century. In his *Minute on Education* (1835) Thomas Babington Macaulay asserted that 'all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England' ⁹⁷. That less than paltry history was but a 'history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns a thousand years long' set in a "geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter"⁹⁸.

In one sense Macaulay was quite right. A Western historian trained in the disciplines of historiography appropriate to his own culture would see in so much of the source material available to the historian of ancient India much of the fantastic and the supernatural and, apparently, little of the scientific and factual. Nevertheless, the source material available for the study of ancient Indian history is

by no means entirely of the fantastic ilk suggested by Macaulay. So much of it, though differing in genre from the conventional type of Western historical sources, does indeed reflect the concern of the ancient Indian mind for what had gone before and for the evolution of *namarupasatyam*, the relative reality which sees changes in terms of cause and effect.

What are some of the kinds of sources that might form the basis of an essentially Indian historiography such as Ray was to suggest in a later work, *Indian Historiography. An Enquiry* (1981)? The *vamshas* and *gotra-pravara* lists of Vedic literature quite obviously confuse the human with the divine, yet it must be admitted that they do contain at least a substratum of historical reality. The *gathas*, *narasamsis*, *danastutis* and *akhyanas*, while having only an incidentally historical purpose, do contain references to actual characters, places and incidents. Their primary purpose was eulogy, so naturally there is in them a substantial degree of exaggeration. This eulogistic literature, the forerunner of later historical *kavya*, was gradually assimilated into the *itihisas* and *puranas*, where there is an admixture of history and mythology. The Upanishads provide source material for an acquaintance with life at court and in the ashrams of the Brahmans. The *vamsha* tradition as promulgated by the ancient bard or *suta* led to the writing of *charitas*; these were biographical pieces composed in the early medieval period and dealing with the lives of well known kings. Their substance, admittedly, was highly selective in that they focused on the personality of a royal hero in the context of courtly life and court organization. Despite the narrowness of the subject matter, the structure of these writings reflects something of a historical method : *prarambha-prayatna-praptyasa-niyatapti-phalagama* (introduction-endeavour-aspiration-prospect of achievement-achievement) is clearly sequential. While not really concerned with a chronology of dates, Indian thought in this period was indeed characterised by concern for ordered sequence of action. The eulogies of kings mentioned in the *Rig Veda* suggest an oral historical tradition, the elements of which are clear in all these forms.

On the basis of such source material, Ray argues that there was indeed a genuine historical awareness in the ancient Indian mind. While ready to admit the usefulness of Western historiography and its applicability to India, he sees no sense in writing Indian history only from sources recognized as valid by Western scholars nor does he accept that their techniques are the only authentic ones. Nevertheless, his approach does not tend towards *itihasa* or *purana*, but is *history* as is generally understood today. In asserting an indigenous theoretical framework for his history, he recognizes the importance of examining rationally the relationship between *desha*, *kala* and *patra*, and *karma*, *punarjanma* and the *purusharthas* (place, time and agent, and deeds, rebirth and the four ends of life). Thus, his concern is with traditional Indian concepts as they might be universally applied. His view of history is firmly from the present; it is his "conscious attempt to bring these concepts up to date,... to interpret them in modern terms"⁹⁹.

For instance, Ray argues that the ancient Indian mind did have a temporal concept, as reflected in the notions of *parampara* and *parivartana* (tradition and change). Further, he notes that the ancient Indians were able to divide and measure time with remarkable perspicacity. He stresses that the Indian concept of time is cyclical, not linear, but this does not rule out the concept of change. On the contrary, change, according to moral determinants, is basic to the whole nation of *chaturyuga*, or the four ages.

On the question of tradition, Niharranjan observes that it is a fallacy to regard Indian society—despite its apparent romantic timelessness—as static; there was always movement and change leading to conflict and adjustment. As we have seen, Ray insists that change in Indian society was 'always within the structural framework'¹⁰⁰, a framework that remained as long as

...the means and methods of production, the ownership and distribution of the fruits of production and the relationship of the castes and classes of people that were involved in the whole operation, were never seriously sought to be changed¹⁰¹.

With the introduction of new methods of production and new systems of distribution the nineteenth century was something of a turning-point in the history of India as well as in the philosophy of Indian history. Yet Ray argues that the nineteenth century's flirtation with modernity does not erode the value of his characteristically Indian concepts but, rather, simply adds to it the validity of certain elements of Western historiography.

Creativity lies not in imitation but in what comes out of the dialectical process of confrontation and synthesis¹⁰².

So much for 'change'. But what of time itself? Ray considers two notions of time in traditional India : the indivisible external and the divisible immediate, both of which merged inextricably in the Indian consciousness over the centuries. Ray gives a lovely illustration of an Indian peasant concerned, on the one hand, with days and nights and months and seasons and, on the other, with birth, death and eternity.

The historiography I should be pleading for in these pages does not ignore this illiterate rural peasant whose inarticulate wisdom seems to have enabled his survival through the centuries¹⁰³.

And yet, Ray notes, Indian historiography has been governed by a European concept of time, one that is linear and distinct from the Indian cyclic concept. The illustration of classical tragedy is given, in which one witnesses a linear progression to a catastrophe. With the Greeks, of course, the process is cyclic, but Ray asserts that in later European literature the tragic progression reaches a point of finality, best evidenced in the works of Shakespeare. (It can, however, be argued that Shakespeare's tragic climax heralds the restoration of order as, indeed, does the imposition of the *dike* of the gods. Perhaps Ray is thinking of more on-going tragic cycles in Greek drama, such as the curse on the House of Labdacus, that have no real parallel in Shakespeare. Nevertheless, his point concerning the nature of time is made.) Ray draws a contrast between Europe and India in

regard to the visual arts. In the one we note posture, muscular arrangement and facial expression that suggest something climactic, critical or attained; in the other there is action, but action and movement in an obvious disposition of placid detachment—

...the articulation of an ever-continuous present, a state of being which is possible in a cyclic concept of time alone¹⁰⁴.

Indeed, in Indian plastic art and classical Indian dancing and music as much as in drama and poetry it is this concept of cyclical time that makes itself manifest¹⁰⁵.

Given such a concept of time, there can be no idea of progress in the Western sense. Ray suggests that modern Indian historiographers ought to recognize some significance in the fact that there is no word in Sanskrit, Prakrit or Apabhramsha to represent the Western notion of 'progress'; hence, Indian history should not be clouded by Marxist historiographers and sociologists with their insistence on using ideas of progress appropriate to the West. As well as European methodology, the European concept of time has dominated the writing of history in India, and Niharranjan suggests that the appropriateness of this concept might well be reassessed.

The relationship between tradition and change is very important in Niharranjan's historiography. To explain the concept of *parampara* Ray discusses the conjoint term, *kula-shila*: *kula* represents one's inheritance, the legacy bequeathed by former generations, and *shila* denotes one's own thought and behaviour. Ray argues that in any society there must be a balance of *kula* and *shila*; an undue concentration of the former would ensure stagnation, while preoccupation with the latter would lead to a society without roots or direction. A world-view based on a balance of *kula* and *shila* brings stability to change and provides the basis and motivation for further change. Hence, *parampara* is a chain of continuity, a middle path of development within the structure of tradition.

In the context of change and tradition, Ray considers the notion of radical change and examines the terms *viplava* and *upaplava*. He notes that the two words derive from the root *plav-* (to flood or wash away), and proceeds to argue from the analogy of a flood—which destroys and removes decadent excrescences, leaving behind a rich deposit of silt with the potential for future prosperity—that radical change can have a constructive and rejuvenating effect on society. The analogy is a good one, but only in a limited sense, for it can also be employed in a negative way. A flood can destroy quite categorically, making whatever silt it may leave behind insufficient to the task of rejuvenation and re-creation; Kampuchea might serve as a modern example. At any rate, Ray's consideration of radical change or revolution might be criticised for its summariness.

To Ray's mind *karma-punarjanma* (the connection between action and rebirth) is best looked at in a societal context, for that concept was an ancient way of articulating the relationship between the individual and society, and had nothing really to do with God, destiny or fate. The societal significance of *karma-punarjanma* can be seen in consideration of the inappropriateness in the Indian historical tradition of detaching the individual from society. Yet Indian historiography has been dominated by an undue concern with kings rather than people, even though

...in the context of the history of the life and culture of the Indian people the focus...was the society itself¹⁰⁶.

Similarly, *chaturvarga* is a social notion : after all, what are the objectives of human endeavour if not rooted in human society?

The discussion moves on to the role of *desha-kala-patra* or place, time and agent, which the historian, obviously, cannot ignore. The *desha* aspect is relatively straightforward, and Ray notes that the ancient Indian texts contain much sound recognition of the importance of topographical and ecological circumstances.

It is in regard to the notion of *kala*, as it concerns periodisation, that difficulties emerge. The phenomena of

change probably offer the best logic for historical periodisation, but determining the nature of change can, indeed, be quite subjective. Ray notes the Marxian principle of historical change, viz., that history alters course, and so may be periodised, according to change in the methods of production of a particular society, and sees this concept as providing a sound explanation of change, especially in post-fourteenth century European history. There are, of course, other determinants of change, which Ray notes, but he asserts that historical change must ultimately be social change—any other kind of change cannot be regarded as adequate in defining historical periods. Hence, he recognizes one of the strengths of Marxian logic, and points out that in India there has been very little social change because of the all too minimal change in Indian history emanating from movements of religious dissent, but in general he is resigned to the prevailing difficulty of periodising Indian history, given its preoccupation with *kula*. He is, therefore, obliged to seek a periodisation without recourse to economic determinants of change, and offers three broad periods of pre-modern Indian history, fairly obviously defined, only one of which is economically determined ; the period from c.1000 to 350 B.C., which was characterised by the use of iron technology; the age of empire spanning c.600-250 B.C.; and the period of Indo-Muslim acculturation from about 1200 to 1556. There are obvious gaps, but we should not need to be reminded that Niharranjan is not putting forward here a definitive historiography, but rather the principles on which a framework may be based. The main point is the final word on the subject of *kala*.

But as long as one can read the signal of change in the course of history and present a rational analysis of the symptoms and causes of change, one is not likely to go very wrong¹⁰⁷.

Ray took up the issue of periodisation in another essay, entitled *The Medieval Factor in Indian History*¹⁰⁸. The study is an interesting one in that instead of asserting the inappropriateness of European concepts in Indian

historiography, it aims to show how one such concept, 'medievalism', can be usefully employed in the interpretation of Indian history. The originality of the study lies in Ray's challenge to the conventional view that the 'medieval' period in Indian history was the Muslim one.

While recognising that 'medieval' is generally used with a simple, chronological meaning, Ray cites the nineteenth century English writer, John Ruskin, to suggest that the term also has value significance, and presents some of the qualitative features of medievalism put forward in 1853 by Ruskin : the absolute authority of the church, conventionalised iconography, a literature of commentary rather than creativity, the hardening of feudalism and a barter economy in preference to a money economy. From this basis he sets out to examine the extent to which the term 'medieval' has connotative significance in Indian history, to see what its chronological definition would be, and to determine its characteristics.

Ray asserts that the Gupta period was the 'pre-medieval' or 'classical' period in India. This classical period came to an end under the stress of the Huna invasion, just as the Roman Empire started to succumb to nomadic invasions at roughly the same time. Neither Rome nor India ever recovered from the shock of invasion to the extent that former glory was restored. Thus, the demise of the Gupta era under the force of the Huna invasion marks the beginning of what may be called the 'medieval' period in India. The general distinguishing feature of Indian medievalism was the erosion of classical values and their replacement by new, usually regional, cultural forms. Niharranjan refers to the great changes that occurred in art since the Gupta period, so much so that by the mid-eleventh century classical features had been virtually supplanted.

In all, Niharranjan has presented a synthesis of the elements of medievalism in India, one that might also be ascribed to Europe : a caste-defined social organization regulated largely by scriptural and priestly decree; a hierarchical, loosely controlled bureaucracy; a feudal land system; and the prevalence of a subsistence rural economy.

In his explanation of *patra*, Niharranjan Ray's sympathy for the masses as the protagonists of history, as distinct from the kings and generals, is implicit. In *Indian Historiography. An Enquiry* he states :

Patra...is the ever-active human being who acts on the stage of *desha* against the backdrop of time...It is because of man's conscious actions that the curtain changes from time to time and reveals new scenes of life. This change of the social scenes is what is called history, and it is in this that the collective humanity that is ever-active on the Indian stage is the real hero of Indian history, he is indeed the maker of this history¹⁰⁹.

The discussion of *patra* is a simple one—Ray merely gives a list of some of the many ethnic groups that have migrated into India since proto-historical times. The aim of the description is to emphasise the point that the people of Indian make up a rich ethnic diversity. Clearly, the historian cannot assume a homogeneity nor adopt a blanket approach to the actors on this particular stage.

Finally, Niharranjan deals with the *chaturvarga*, or the four ends of life, which he sees as providing a rational and comprehensive framework for the history of the Indian people and their culture.

...I feel that there has hardly ever been in the history of human civilization a more well-thought out, rounded and rational categorization of human activities, ideas and aspirations¹¹⁰.

To Ray's mind the *chaturvarga* give a distinctly social thrust to the history of India. Even *dharma*, so often construed as 'religion', is taken to be an essentially social term; its activities are indeed social and its objectives are secular. (It is pointed out that *moksha*—spiritual deliverance—is a later concept.) *Artha* is obviously a social term, embracing as it does the production and distribution of wealth and the consequent need for political organization. *Kama* involves all the creative endeavours of man. These three *vargas*, therefore, comprehend all of man's behaviour, the yearnings

of his mind, the aspirations of his soul and the inspirations of his creative impulse; they offer, clearly, an excellent basis on which to write the social history of India. As for *moksha*, Ray notes its profound and pervasive sway over the minds of Hindus as well as Muslims and Christians.

I should certainly take duly adequate notice of it. Indeed, all historians of Indian must do so, irrespective of their personal ideologies, since it is a fact of Indian life to this day even¹¹¹.

Niharranjan Ray's ideas on history are interesting from a number of points of view, but most significant is the crucial premise on which his whole historiography is based : that India is characteristically different from all other countries, peoples and cultures. A thorough understanding of this difference should make abundantly clear the inappropriateness of Western philosophy of history to the historiography of India. The most obvious elements of difference between India and a Western European nation may be noted : the vastness of the land, the diversity of race, the multiplicity of language and the pronounced regionalization of culture. There are, of course, many other differences, but these are sufficient to show that India, as a subject of history, cannot be thought of in any monolithic sense.

If a historian is going to write about India comprehensively, however, he must be able to utilise at least some unifying elements that lend to the apparent diversity a sensible and meaningful integrity. Conventional European approaches, especially a readily convenient periodisation, are simply not appropriate. What Niharranjan Ray has done is to offer certain elements — some universal and some characteristically Indian—to provide a rational integrity for a comprehensive history. The continuity of the longevity of Indian civilization might on the one hand be a daunting factor in the historian's attempts to periodise Indian history, but on the other hand it strengthens and broadens the applicability of Ray's integrating elements, so ensuring their validity.

Finally, we should note Niharranjan Ray's view of Man. To his mind the prince and the pauper are of equal value in the making of history; indeed, the pauper very often eclipses the prince in this regard. Nor is he interested in any particular aspect of the common man—as an economic entity, a sociological component, a religious partisan of one kind or another, a poet or painter or songster. Rather, it is the entire gamut of human behaviour, idealism and creativity that occupies Niharranjan's interest. His view of the common man as the central character on the stage of history permeates his entire scholarly output; more particularly, the broad canvas of his *History of the Bengali People* is a reflection of this embracing vision of humanity.

The life of the common man is, of course, a theme dear to Marxists; however, Ray was not governed by an adherence to Marxian methodology, employing it only when he thought it appropriate.

It is a fine analytical tool and a sophisticated method of evaluation and interpretation. Personally speaking, I have been using it whenever and wherever I found it to my advantage to do so, but hardly altogether exclusively and with any claim to absolute certainty or to its infallibility as an argument, but certainly for providing a hypothesis, a probability which might or might not help a step toward a rational generalization¹¹².

Nor was Ray's emphasis on the common man an exclusive one. He does, when it is relevant to his purpose, tell the story of great men and their deeds, and credits some of them with a special greatness that the Marxist, perhaps, would deny.

I am not a believer in historical determinism; on the contrary, I hold that there are moments in the life of an individual as well as a people, when a great personality or a group of men and women of vision and imagination, determination and courage, can get hold of history by the neck and turn it in the direction they want, provided they can enlist the support of the multitudes¹¹³.

Ray's largely subjective and relativist approach to history inevitably bought him into controversy with his notable contemporary, the positivist Romesh Chandra Majumdar. Majumdar's reputation as a historian of India and of Bengal is of the first order, and none could deny the depth and range of his research, the authoritativeness of his writings and the overall impeccability of his scholarship. His works are characterised by an almost impassioned obsession with fact and a relentless quest for objectivity. According to Majumdar, the sole duty of the historian is to relate the truth—if he cannot, he should remain silent.

I think we are gradually losing sight of the fundamental object and principles of writing history...I have no doubt in my mind...that history must be regarded as an eternal quest for truth¹⁴.

...history, divorced from truth, does not help a nation—its future should be laid on the stable foundations of truth and not on the quicksands of falsehood however alluring it may appear at present¹⁵.

Niharranjan Ray did not share Majumdar's passion for 'absolute' truth. This is not to say that Ray was careless of the truth but, rather, that he was more realistic than Majumdar in coming to terms with the immense difficulty—often, impossibility—of determining what indeed is historical truth. As has been mentioned earlier, Ray actually questions the degree to which history can ever be truthful and objective. The historian, he wrote in 1981, works in the light of his own "personal ideology or preference, his terms of reference, his world view of things"¹⁶. It is to be expected, then, that there will inevitably be an element of subjectivity in the process of the historian's research, the selection of his material and the analysis of his data. It is arrogant for any historian to claim that his work is value-free unless, of course, his aim has been merely to impart simple, verifiable information. The historian is a product of his own place and time and culture, which together provide the standpoint from which he views the past. How can the historian, then, detach himself from his subject matter and put aside the

insight that he has developed in his own lifetime? If he is to do more than record the mere existence of, let us say, Shashanka, he will be obliged to judge him according to his own present-conditioned understanding of what constitutes ambition or pride or heroism or cruelty or whatever.

Subjectivity is inevitable in the structuring of history too. A work of history must have a framework, a philosophy of history on which it is based. Without such a philosophy, history would simply be the presentation of a body of incoherent material, a jungle of data. Political history might be given an inherent framework by the simple progression of chronology, but with social history the problem is more real. Social developments do not reveal themselves with quite the same crystal clarity as do political processes, for they are not so tightly connected with particular time and place. Because the same simple chronology cannot be discerned in social history, a more interpretive framework may be required. Social history may be written according to a latterly conceived ideology : religion, nationalism, class dogma, etc. There is a risk here that the work will cease to be history and belong more appropriately to the realm of propaganda, for the story of the past can all too easily be used to substantiate a prefabricated theory.

All this is not to say that the historian should surrender to subjectivity and regard the quest for truth as a lost cause. Central to Niharranjan Ray's philosophy of history is the necessity for the historian to realize the relativity of his objectivity.

Indeed, truth in history can only mean relative truth, and of this truth even, no historian can ever know the whole since of no given time and space the totality of facts, situations, etc. are ever available to him¹⁷.

While this shortcoming in the writing of history is inevitable, it does not preclude the value of whatever moral or aesthetic judgements the historian may make or the arguments he may formulate against judgements with which he may disagree.

The quest for objective truth in history must take into account that there are facts and there are historical facts. One may present facts and only facts, but the way in which a historian *arranges* the facts that he has *selected*, to say nothing of those he has consciously or unconsciously *rejected*, can in itself influence opinion. Facts dance a puppet's dance on strings pulled by the historian. The past offers a vast body of data, the truth of which is indisputable. But of what value is most of it? The answer to this question is decided by historians without deference to any innate objective historicity the material may be said to possess. The task of the historian is not simply to record, but to interpret, and no one can detach himself from his own value system while interpreting history—not even the noble judge held up as a model by some historians. Perhaps Tolstoy got it right —

The subject of history is not the will of man as such but our presentation of it¹⁸.

Ray believes, then, quite strongly in the ineluctability of a value-laden history. Given the unavoidable element of subjectivity in the selection and use of evidence, the present must be diffused through whatever is written about the past. Ray mentions the claim of some historians to write history according to Ranke, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, and points out that they who

...chronicle what they consider to be 'facts' of history
...impart information alone, but no knowledge¹⁹.

Marxist historiography, he notes, is essentially subjective—a historical method complementing a particular ideology. Any claim to objectivity in history must be a qualified one; absolute objectivity simply is not possible.

This does not mean that Ray is advocating some kind of empirical anarchy. In a relative sense, objectivity is not only possible but essential. Similarly, truth, too, can only be relative and partial. The only absolute truth, he points out, is God or Brahman, of whom the historian cannot claim to know all. Ray is critical of those historians who see *truth* and *fact* in history as synonymous, explaining that historical truth lies

beyond historical fact.

Therefore, when in regard to history one speaks of 'science' and the 'scientific' method one may bear in mind the limitations of a historian ¹²⁰.

The best that 'scientific' method can mean is optimum use of human reason, while imagination and intuition must not be cast out of the historian's resources.

Ray's work, then, aims to establish the claim that the writing of Indian history must be recognized as having bases and directions peculiar to Indian culture. Ray exhibits a scepticism towards the positivists and their reverence for 'truth' and 'facts', upholding a healthy respect for the limitations of objectivity in history and accepting the inevitable subjective element. He cannot accept as appropriate to the writing of Indian history the techniques and methodology conventional in Western historiography. In particular, he notes the concept of time as cyclic, the special nature of tradition and change and the *kula-shila* balance, and the difficulties involved in periodising Indian history. As a framework appropriate to India, he asserts the historiographical value of the *chaturvarga* or four ends of life.

Ultimately, Ray's philosophy—with its basic interest in the centrifugal nature of society and the progression of the whole in harmony and cooperation—reflects the optimism of the liberral humanist *weltanschauung* that was his inheritance, while the realist in him, of course, cannot ignore—albeit with sadness—the centripetal forces that give rise to pessimism as the historian looks to the future.

Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People*

While Niharranjan Ray was in jail writing the bulk of *History of the Bengali People*—at much the same time that Jawaharlal Nehru was in jail writing *The Discovery of India* — the sun was still refusing to set on the British Empire. The recent history of some two hundred years with which educated Indians were familiar was, to all intents and purposes, the history of British India. To the nationalist, it was a discomfoting history, a history of embarrassment, a history even of shame. Haridas Mukherjee wrote in 1959:

The history of a subject nation is not made up of the pious and impious doings of the foreign race ruling over it, but is revealed more truly in the hopes and endeavors, trials and struggles of the people¹²¹.

Both Nehru and Ray sought to write history that would encourage and produce pride rather than embarrassment or shame. Nehru's *Discovery* covers the broad sweep of Indian history, giving prominence to so many of the forgotten or under-played highlights as it were of India's past. He writes with restrained enthusiasm, yet with warm empathy, underlining the sustaining integrity, "the hopes and endeavors, trials and struggles of the people". It is a nationalist history, but by no means a chauvinistic work. In much the same way, Ray's *History* manages to be at once patriotic and detached in its treatment of Bengal's past.

Niharranjan Ray's profound love of his country and his insatiable joy in its people and their past are clearly reflected in the Preface to his *History*. Referring to his extensive wanderings throughout the land as a young man, he reveals something of the spirit which inspired the writing of his *History of the Bengali People*.

My Bengal and its people are not to be found in the pages of ancient manuscripts; rather, they are inscribed on my heart. To me the ancient past is as alive and real as the immediate past¹²².

Yet the Preface also recognizes—as does Nehru's *Discovery*—that India's past has been, at least recently, an unhappy one, characterised by

... famine, political upheaval, partition, frontier hostility, personal degeneration, poverty...¹².

Ray does not dodge these harsh realities, but expresses the hope that his book might excite a spirit of optimism in the hearts of its readers and point to some positive directions for India's future.

The book is therefore written with a clearly nationalist purpose, yet it is saved from being doctrinaire or propagandist by its notable sense of balance. It is clear that Ray has quite consciously selected his material not to fit a preconceived thesis but to give a comprehensive and rational perspective to past realities. The dream-world history written by so many in the previous century could have no place in the more realistic realm of the post-World War II era. The line in Dvijendralal Roy's lovely song, "Out of dreams this land has been made", is not a leitmotif of Niharranjan's *History of the Bengali People*.

As has been mentioned, Niharranjan Ray's interest was pre-eminently in social history, his aim being to blend the various elements of daily life-economic, political, religious and cultural—into an integrated totality. In actuality, these diverse elements do not exist as distinct and detached from one another, nor should they in written history. Hence, while the chapter headings of Niharranjan's work indicate a particular focus and emphasis (geography, caste, religion *et al.*), the material of the chapters is organized in such a way as to give an overall social panorama.

At the outset of his work Niharranjan makes plain that political history cannot be the entire history of a country, and that the writing of history is indeed fulfilled in social history. In this regard Ray is out of line with most of his predecessors, the traditional view being that political history is of greater value than social history. Whereas the *Dacca University History* might be said to strike a balance (it devotes eight chapters or 249 pages to political history and nine chapters or 440 pages to non-political history), some might accuse Ray of an undue bias. Thirteen of the chapters of his *History of the Bengali People*

are given over to social or cultural history and only two are concerned with political history ; of these two, chapter Nine, "Administrative Patterns" has a strong social base to it. Contrary to seeing this as a bias, it can be argued that Ray does not minimise the importance of political history (Chapter Ten, "The Dynastic Round" makes up ten percent of the complete edition and twelve percent of the abridged edition), but that he gives a new importance to social and cultural history, so creating a more balanced whole.

Yet, as we have seen, Ray was by no means the first Bengali to give special importance to the place of the ordinary people in the writing of history. Ray's significance lies in the fact that he sought to place the popular nature of the society and culture of the Bengali people on a solid historical foundation.

While each of the chapters of the *History* is substantially self-contained, the work as a whole is given spine by a number of recurring themes. In particular, we may note three : the age-old ethnic distinctiveness of the Bengalis, the Brahman ascendancy, and the regression from an urban-based culture to a predominantly rural one.

The theme of Bengali distinctiveness is expounded initially in the second chapter of the *History*, which concerns itself with the anthropological origins and development of the Bengali people. The ethnic distinctiveness of the Bengalis is demonstrated, and the point is made that Aryanization in Bengal was preceded by millennia of civilized life in the eastern region of India. The point is reinforced and given a social significance in Chapter Six, which presents a detailed account of caste in Bengal towards the end of the ancient period. It is made quite clear that the caste system differed greatly there from the social order bound by the tradition of north and central India. It is especially worthy of note that no claim to Kshatriya or Vaishya status was ever made in ancient Bengali society, and that the prominence of hybrid castes was a characteristic of the Bengali social order. Thus, Bengal is presented as a frontier zone of greater India.

Politically, Bengal was marked by a unity quite early in its history, particularly during the Pala period (750-1200). Ray also makes the point on many occasions throughout the book

that the Palas were Bengali and non-Brahmanical, as distinct from their immediate predecessors, the Guptas (330-510), and their successors, the Senas (1060-1215). Although the centre of power shifted from Pundra to Gaura and Vanga, and sojourned elsewhere from time to time too, the cultural integrity of Bengal always remained substantially intact. However, throughout India and no less in Bengal the growth of feudalism and the gradual intensification of a parochial consciousness hastened the disintegration of that political unity and most certainly militated against the realization of any consciousness of a greater India.

The idea is further developed by Ray's emphasis on the dietary peculiarities of the Bengalis, giving Aryan India cause to look on them with some degree of disdain. Ray argues that the plethora of waterways in Bengal made fish consumption a natural habit, and the strength of rural folk custom deriving from very early, pre-Aryan times sustained that habit.

Finally, Ray demonstrates that religion, too, tended to set the Bengalis apart from the people of north India. In what is a very bold and imaginative thesis, he argues that Bengal was never converted by the Aryans to their form of worship, nor did it simply accept the religion of its conquerors.

...anthropological and sociological interpretations of Indian society and culture have advanced only so far as it is clear that what we recognize today as Hindu religious practice is simply a synthesised form of Aryan practices with pre-Aryan and non-Aryan practices ¹²⁴.

Indeed, the folk influence in Bengali religion was always able to prevail over the influence of Aryan Brahmanism. As evidence of this Ray points to the various peasant and artisan festivals where there is no place for a Brahman priest; to the obvious legacies of the pre-Aryan tribal religion still to be seen in Bengali Hinduism — for example, the ascription of divinity to various aspects of the natural world, to birds and beasts and to certain crops; and to the various local festivals, gods and goddesses, *yatras* and *vratas*, as well as the flag emblems and the mounts of certain deities that can also be said to derive from pre-Aryan folk religion.

Throughout the book, then, we are constantly reminded of the distinct cultural expression of the Bengalis. In noting the emergent literary styles, *Gauri* and *Vaidarbhi*, we are also made aware of an urge towards political distinctiveness as the *Gauri* regional style of writing come to reflect the *Gauratantra* or the overall distinctiveness—ethnic, political and cultural—of Gaura, the heartland, perhaps, of ancient Bengal.

In the cultural history of Bengal the development and manifestation of the *Gauri* style are deeply significant. In this regard the term *Gauratantra*... is worth bearing in mind. From the middle of the sixth century the people of Gaura started to become conscious of their own distinctiveness... This distinctiveness became very clear under Shashanka. In literature and the arts this 'Gauratantra' took the form of the *Gauri* style which, freed from the influence of the *Vaidarbhi* style of the rest of India, developed and manifested itself separately. Undoubtedly this reflected the creativity, nature and taste characteristic of the people of Gaura¹²⁵.

Here, of course, is further evidence for the view that the process of Aryanization in east India proceeded very largely on Bengali terms, and that the inherent urge of the Bengalis for independence—albeit so frequently confounded in the political realm—was basic to all aspects of their cultural history.

The second theme concerns the growing Brahman ascendancy. Throughout the history of ancient Bengal Ray traces the rise of the Brahman class from a position of relative obscurity to a political, economic, social, intellectual and religious pre-eminence. This ascendancy is treated in various contexts in *History of the Bengali People*, the first of them being in the chapter on land distribution. Nearly all the evidence we have of land systems in ancient Bengal is epigraphical and is related to transactions in land proprietorship and occupancy. The inscriptions are of two classes : those from the fifth to the eighth century, which relate to land being sold for the purpose of making land grants, and those from the eighth to the thirteenth century, which are edicts of direct land grants. The beneficiaries of all these transactions were religious institutions. The Palas were Buddhists, but their reign was characterised

by an equanimity of generosity to both Buddhists and Brahmans. Indeed, many Brahman individuals benefited personally from Pala land grants. Sena land grants were almost entirely personal grants to Brahmans. Thus, in the Pala period, roughly half the beneficiaries of land transactions were Brahmans, while in the Sena period Brahmans were virtually the only beneficiaries. Hence, their economic strength was enhanced.

In Ray's discussion of caste in Bengal we find further evidence of the ascendancy of Brahman power and influence in society. Ray shows that Bengal absorbed migratory waves of Brahmans throughout the centuries, and that the various regimes—Brahmanical and Buddhist—treated them with respect and favour. Indeed, Ray concludes that by the end of the pre-Muslim period, with the active support of the Sena Dynasty, the Brahmans had achieved an unassailable pre-eminence in Bengali society, transcending many logical restraints on their personal lives that might have been in consonance with their original priestly function. Thus, the anomalies and rigidities of caste became even more pronounced in the Sena-Varmana period as society became more and more widely regulated.

Further evidence of increasing Brahman influence is found in Ray's analysis of the class patterns of ancient Bengal (Chapter Seven), where two significant trends are highlighted. The first is the intrusion of the regime, through the class of government officials, into virtually every aspect of social and economic life. This, in fact, meant the intrusion of Brahman influence, for as the Brahmans attained more and more wealth through land, they achieved more and more power, and they and the regime—especially in the Sena-Varmana era—became each other's staunchest support. The second trend, intricately related to the first, concerns the administration itself. Throughout the vast web of caste and class ran the thread of state power, giving a special cohesion to the administration at every level from the ferryman to the crown prince, while at the same time fostering a mushrooming bureaucracy rooted in an entrenched system of vassal administration. One of the more obvious effects of this was the squeezing of the ordinary people into a condition of mute subservience. As Ray says,

...the strength and influence of the common people proceeded to wane¹²⁶.

and

...the knot of mutual self-interest between the landed gentry and the Brahmans was tied tighter¹²⁷.

Brahmanism was preceded in Bengal by the heterodox Aryan doctrines of Buddhism, Jainism and the Ajivika cult, and Ray has found no real evidence of the extension of Brahmanism in Bengal prior to the Gupta period. However, it was during the time of the Guptas that Brahmanism in Bengal received something of an initial fillip, and that Indian religious ideas in general were enhanced by the extensive trade throughout the subcontinent as well as abroad. Hence, Brahmans were advanced by the prospering of Brahmanism.

(The) fusion of political and economic life gave great impetus to religious and cultural intermingling...

The history of Bengal is closely connected with this great development in Indian history. As part of the political and economic unity of the Gupta empire, Bengal was affected by the strong-flowing stream of religion and culture from all over India and in time this region came to be a bordering participant in the culture of the whole of India¹²⁸.

Although it is widely held that Vedic Brahmanism advanced during the Gupta period, Ray believes that Puranic religion was much stronger in Bengal; to support his claim he gives a detailed account of the iconic evidence of the Puranic deities of both Brahmanism and Buddhism. Buddhism, of course, was both older and stronger in Bengal, and the number, size and prestige of its monasteries is testimony to the fame and importance of east India in the Buddhist world as a whole. The Palas, themselves Buddhists, enhanced the glory of east Indian Buddhism by their magnanimous favours to Buddhist institutions, and yet it is, perhaps, ironic that at the same time Brahmanism also increased in extent and prestige due to the indiscriminating liberality of the same dynasty.

However, it was really the development of occultism in

Bengal that hastened the decline of Buddhism. Ray gives a detailed account of the esoteric cults of Buddhism as well as those of Brahmanism, and from his discussion it is quite clear that the similarities between Tantric Brahmanism and Tantric Buddhism were emerging as considerably greater than the differences. Ray writes of rivalry and conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism, but also points out the very obvious areas of harmony and integration, especially on the Tantric level. When we remember that the Lord Buddha himself had been accepted into the Brahmanical pantheon as an incarnation of Vishnu, it is understandable that Tantrism was a catalyst for the absorption of Buddhism into Brahmanism. Although Buddhism ceased to exist in its own right as a distinct religion by the time of the Senas, its ideas and practices were diffused into Vaishnavism and the cults of the Nathas and the Bauls.

This absorption was accompanied by the Brahmanical ascendancy during the Sena period. We are told of the particular devotions of the various kings, and the strength of the orthodoxy of this non-Bengali dynasty is shown to be critical in Bengali history as extensive state patronage was bestowed on Smriti scholars as well as on Vedic Brahmans and their practices which, up to then, had been a merely formalistic aspect of the religious life of the region. With this statement of the triumph of Brahmanism, Niharranjan points out some of the inconsistencies and incongruities of the Brahmanism of Sena Bengal. It is a striking illustration of the extraordinary synergetic polarities that are interwoven throughout the religious fabric of the region.

The decline of a highly developed urban civilization and its regression to a predominantly rural one is the third of the major themes elaborated by Ray in his *History*. In a sense it emerges from the previous theme. Decline, according to Ray, though accelerated by certain physical causes such as the silting up of the port of Tamralipti, derived basically from two ramifications of the Brahman ascendancy, notably the feudalisation of the state and the accession of the Sena Dynasty. The former of these encouraged a centripetal force in the body politic, disintegrating and compartmentalising, stunting

idealism and narrowing vision. The latter further intensified parochialism with the exclusivism of its Brahmanical orthodoxy and its disdainful antipathy for trade and commerce.

The theme of regression is most prominent in Chapters Eight and Eleven, which deal with the daily lives of the Bengali people and where Ray develops the theme of the social contrasts between town and village. According to him, the most striking contrast between rural and urban society was in sexual mores and morals, towns being in his view especially 'degenerate' places, particularly during the Sena period when the region itself was in decline.

Literature provides much of the evidence for Ray's view of the gradual deterioration of Bengali culture. While Ray recognizes the *Kavindravachanasamucchaya*, the *Prakrita-paingala* and the *Saduktikarnamrita* as anthologies of worth containing much that represents the common man of Bengal in his simple and honest life of toil and struggle with nature, he is critical of the confectionery literature of the Sena court. Even the immensely popular *Gitagovinda* does not escape this criticism. Indeed, the decadence of the closing stages of the ancient period is made plain as this much acclaimed work is set in the context of the lust and sensuality of the Sena court. Ray's recognition of doom is just as plain.

When half of Bengal had been taken over by the Muslims the same joys of Virndavana continued unrestrained at the court of Keshavasena at Vikramapur. The genius of a Dhoyi, Jayadeva or Govardhanacharya could not be constrained from being a burnt offering in those flames...¹²⁹.

Ray also notes a decline in the visual arts, which he links to the decline of urban civilization and the return to the rustic in Bengali life. He asserts that the transformation from the 'classical' to the 'medieval' in Bengali art began in the seventh century¹³⁰ and he traces the subsequent decline—remarking, however, that the tenth century was a notable high point—to the end of the Sena period. In consonance with his declared concept of social history he shows that the artistic developments were reflections of wider and more complex forces.

But from the end of the seventh century the political and cultural history of India had started to take a new turn. Political consciousness was dominated by small local states and feudatories, and this regional mentality was soon reflected in the cultural realm too ... In Indian history the beginning of the middle ages is marked by the eclipse of the thought and ideals of greater India by local and regional interests¹³¹.

Ray's view is that this microcosmic political vision was complemented by a preference for the diminutive in the arts. Thus, most of the statues described in Ray's *History* are relatively small; the only evidence we have of painting is of manuscript embellishment; and apart from a few splendid exceptions the architecture of Bengal, especially that of stupa and temple, was also conceived on a small scale.

In the case of architecture there is no evidence that in ancient Bengal there was any grand, bold concept, any great enterprise or any extraordinary skills of construction; in the rustic life there was little scope for any of that. Bengal's rural economy was modest, its imagination was limited, and its lifestyle was not really affected by any profound and pervasive delight in a grand, outgoing way of life; that, therefore, was unknown in Bengali art too¹³².

Ray's work makes clear that the Bengalis had a preference for lyric poetry over the epic; that social units or castes were comparatively small; that the disintegrating nature of feudalism fostered a tendency towards political diminution.

This limitation is explained to some extent in the final chapter, a masterly piece of writing by which Niharranjan seeks to draw together the major threads that make up the fabric of his history. In noting the constancy of the tribal consciousness of the Bengalis, the predominance of agriculture in their economic life and their consequent village identity, Ray sees parochialism as an essential fact of the history of Bengal, always militating against any sense of nation.

Some of our intellectual leaders, religious gurus and political administrators have, on the one hand, tried by

various means to cultivate an all-Indian consciousness, while on the other hand many of them have also nourished and gratified in different ways our narrow, regional consciousness¹²³.

The traditional system of wealth, with its intense reliance on agriculture and its village basis, together with the prevailing system of administration — monarchy upheld by feudalism and bureaucracy—are the major reasons Ray offers for the triumph of parochialism. This limited outlook was further enhanced by caste and its economic expression, class. The external trade of the Gupta period was indeed a broadening factor; it led to general prosperity, a flourishing of the arts and of learning, and a growth of urban civilization. But with reversion to agricultural dependence there was a general decline in the quality of Bengali civilization.

The various important endeavours in the realms of manufactures, trade and commerce, the multifariousness of experience and the contact with the world at large, that pervasive enrichment of life with success, failure and incentive to greatness could hardly exist to any extent at all in the village-based rustic life¹²⁴.

It is against this background that Niharranjan draws the philosophical conclusion to his work, asserting, perhaps controversially, that the Muslim conquest was a logical culmination in the course of Bengal's historical development. With that consideration he shuts the door, as it were, on the ancient period. However, he is conscious of what may be seen to lie on the other side of the door—not, actually, the Muslim and British periods of Bengali history, but rather the 'price' that the history yet to come must pay for the opportunities for momentous change that were missed in the past.

Of course, while these three underlying themes in Ray's *History*—Bengali distinctiveness, Brahman ascendancy and commercial and urban decline—have, for clarity's sake, been treated here in isolation, they are often entwined together. For example, it is reasonable to suggest that it is actually in the nature of the distinctiveness of the Bengalis to revert so easily to rural dependence. In another light, this distinctiveness lies

at the basis of the failure of the Brahman ascendancy to be a totally orthodox one; to a large extent Brahmanism was Bengalised in that its orthodoxy had been diluted by diverse Puranic, Tantric and Buddhist elements by the end of the Sena-Varmana period. The supremacy of Brahmanism in the Sena-Varmana era corresponded to the decline in trade and the economy in general, a deterioration in morals and an enfeeblement of the arts; the narrowing of economic horizons surely narrowed Bengal's cultural vision.

Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People*, born of a belief in Bengali nationhood, seeks to understand the essence of that nationhood by tracing the roots of the Bengali people deep into antiquity and by examining the factors that gave rise to their particular, distinct character. The work is unsympathetic to Brahmanism, whose orthodox values and institutions were never really attractive to the essential character and needs of the Bengalis, and which were so often seen to represent tunnel-vision and reaction. The outlook of Ray's *History* is, broadly, modernistic and immensely innovative. For Niharranjan, the 'lesson' of the Bengali past is that the future of India depends on a commercial-industrial economy and an urban-led culture.

We should now attempt some general assessment of this great work. As far as substance is concerned, Ray's work owes, as has been noted, a great debt to its forebears. In the opening chapter Ray states :

I have not discovered any new material. All the facts and sources are generally known in academic circles, and from them I have selected my content!¹³⁵

However, as far as method, style and philosophy are concerned, Ray's work represents a remarkable turning-point in Indian historiography.

It is a weighty work. It is composed in fifteen chapters, covering more than one thousand pages (five hundred in the abridged edition). It offers valuable maps and a wealth of plates, a quality—as Prabodh Chandra Sen observes—that is part of a well-established tradition in Bengali scholarship. Sen cites Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay, D. C. Sen, Ramprasad

Chandra and A. K. Maitreya as leaders in this regard, and recognizes the work of D. C. Sen and R. D. Banerji as truly excellent in wealth of illustration and the connection of those illustrations to the respective texts. He points to 190 illustrations amongst the plates of the *Dacca University History* and the 31 illustrations at the end of Rakhal Das Banerji's *Banglur Itihas*, making favourable comparison with Ray's 32. (The 1980 edition offers 71).

Ray's endeavour was, indeed, unprecedented. His *History* was the first comprehensive account of ancient Bengal, syncretically interpreted, claiming the common man as its focus. The title and its emphasis in the opening chapter are indeed necessary to set this work off from what had come to be accepted as conventional history, notwithstanding what may have been written about Greece or England. Indeed, as P. C. Sen points out, Ray saw it necessary to give his title a specific thrust, a sense by which it would be clearly understood that his history was not a catalogue of events but the presentation and interpretation of the life of a people. An older view of history as the story of great men and their deeds is the opposite to that of Ray, whose aim it is to present the story of the common man—countless in number, infinite in variety, and anonymous. History from the top was reversed by Ray's macrocosmic focus, and for the first time in Indian historiography history from the bottom was seriously offered as an authentic means of interpreting the known totality of a people's past and its cultural tradition.

However, the extent to which Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People* is, as it claims to be, history from the bottom or, as P. C. Sen would have it, a 'people's history'¹³⁶, might be questioned. There is, of course, the truism that history is more than the history of the common man : kings and generals and wealthy merchants and the like have always been a highly significant fact of life and history cannot ignore them. It can also be argued, albeit tenuously at times, that the policies of kings affect the common man who pays their taxes; that generals can conquer only with armies made up of ordinary people; and that merchants get rich on the inherent weakness of the masses. However, this is not necessarily the stuff of

significant social history. In the power play between, let us say, Shashanka and Harshavardhana, or during the course of the anarchy in the seventh and eighth centuries, it does no more than state the obvious when one notes the plight of the common people. It is also a simple, though regrettable, fact that the sources available to the historian allow for much more to be said about the few at the pinnacle of the social pyramid than the multitudes making up its bulk. Moreover, 'upper-class' history can exist in its own right. The life and culture of the Sena court, for example, continued quite in detachment from the lives of the ordinary populace.

Nevertheless, the facility with which Niharranjan Ray focuses attention on and through the common people throughout so much of his history makes it a social history of remarkable dimension. It must be stressed, however, that the claim for history from the bottom or a people's history can too easily be over-stated. Ray's reiterated recognition of the Brahman ascendancy, to cite a single example, should be warning against such confident labling.

It is worth making a comparative observation. We have seen the *History of the Bengali People* is noteworthy in that it has as its focus the common people and that it is recognized as innovatory as history from the bottom. In the writing of ancient Indian history, Ray's concern for the common man was shared by many of his contemporaries, and most notably by Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi (1907-66). It is, of course, unlikely that Ray was greatly influenced by the Maharashtrian scholar, whose most important works¹³⁷ were published well after Ray's *History of the Bengali People*. However, it is of interest to see Ray in perspective with some of the luminaries of his time; hence, on the issue of 'left-wing' history, a comparative note on Ray and Kosambi is warranted.

Whereas Ray's interest in the masses was a fundamental element in the dialectic of syncretism, Kosambi's was essential to the dialectic of Marxism. The two scholars bear many similarities: both were polymaths, both were profoundly interested in ancient India, both wrote history from the bottom. Methodologically, the two men shared a common respect for an inter-disciplinary approach to historical research and for

anthropological and sociological field-work. The difference between them is an ideological one. Whereas Ray tended left, Kosambi was a committed Marxist. Of course, Ray would agree with Kosambi's notion of history from the bottom.

To maintain that history has always been made by such backward, ignorant common people, and that they, not the high priest, glittering autocrat, war-lord, financier, or demagogue, must shape it better in the future, seems presumptuous formalism. Nevertheless, it is true. The proper study of history in a class society means analysis of the differences between the interests of the classes on top and of the rest of the people...¹³⁸.

However, Ray could not have gone as far as to say about his *History* that

The present approach implies a definite theory of history known as dialectical materialism, also called Marxism after its founder¹³⁹.

Kosambi's analysis of history also has a much stronger economic basis than Ray's. Ray might well agree with Kosambi that what is important in history is not kings but ploughs¹⁴⁰, but change or continuity in methods of production is by no means a basic feature of his *History*. Of course, Kosambi's Marxism is not uncritical; he points out that Marx was often wrong in his interpretation of Asian history, and that Indian history does not really fit in with the Marxist notion of periodisation. He is also critical of the Marxist theory of Asiatic mode of production and the unchangeability of Asiatic societies. However, such criticism notwithstanding, Ray's writing does not reflect the same degree of ideological commitment as does Kosambi's. As has already been noted, Ray recognized Marxist dialectic as a useful tool to be employed whenever appropriate, but he did not see it as a methodological be-all and end-all. Despite his erstwhile membership of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, Ray's Marxism extended only as far as his use of the common people as a focus for the interpretation of social history.

While it cannot be argued that Ray was alone amongst his contemporaries in championing the masses as the focus of

social history, he was certainly the first to write serious, scholarly history from the bottom without the confinement of a commitment to a pre-defined philosophy. His *History of the Bengali People* is 'leftist' in no conventional political sense, but rather by virtue of the fact that it aims to examine the masses in a brighter light than that in which they had hitherto been seen.

The idea of a real 'people's' history of the ancient period, at least in a cultural sense, is made little more than sloganistic by the dichotomy between the 'classical' and the 'popular' made patently clear throughout the work. Actually, Ray makes no obvious attempt to try to homogenise what is clearly a diverse culture. The plinth of the Paharpur Temple, for instance, is looked at in its own right as a source of social history, and not as an alleged high point of the artistic expression of the Bengali people as a whole. Indeed, it is seen as somewhat distinct from the greater bulk of Bengali sculpture with its royal and sacerdotal origins. The dichotomy between 'high' and 'low' culture manifests itself just as plainly in music, in literature and, especially, in religion. It would be absurd to suggest that the dichotomy between classical and popular culture is unique to India; however, the distinction between the 'Great Tradition' and the numerous 'Little Traditions' is sure enough to make it impossible for Niharranjan to draw a substantial cultural synthesis from the two.

Let us now consider sources. By the end of the forties, Bengali historiography sought to follow the European positivist model with its stress on objectivity and its quest for truth, based on sources that were as forensic as possible. Ray's work represents a notable departure from this trend. As we have already seen, Niharranjan did not have a simple, categorical notion of the nature of historical truth, and much of his work is rational hypothesis and conjecture. Given the nature of his sources, many of which are open to interpretation, his work contains a significant element of subjectivity. *History of the Bengali People* raised challenges to established scholarly notions about truth and the aims of history, and asserted new values and methodologies for subsequent historians.

Much has been said about the scarcity of sources for the writing of Indian history, particularly the history of the ancient period. Nevertheless, the sources on which Ray's *History of the Bengali People* is based are immense and are certainly more varied than those used by any of his predecessors. Niharranjan has assembled an abundance of primary and secondary material: archaeological relics, linguistic and anthropological data, inscriptions, literary and religious works, travel diaries, geographical treatises and maps, architectural remains, items of art and iconography, and the writings of ancient and medieval historians as well as the works of historians of his own time. From all of this he has more than credibly woven a vast and intricate tapestry depicting so much of the world of the ancient Bengalis.

Many of Ray's sources are, to be frank, not of the kind traditionally regarded as respectable in the writing of political history, but this does not mean that they are not appropriate to the writing of social and cultural history. Not all history need be gleaned from 'authentic', written documents. There are also those who would deny to history an imaginative dimension and would, therefore, look with scorn on the plinth of the Paharpur Temple or the *Saduktikarnamrita* as historical sources (even though all prehistory is constructed from sources such as the former). Ray's respect for such sources is by no means unqualified and his reliance on them is not total. But for the want of more precise, categorical material, it is not unreasonable to at least attempt a history on the basis of such material.

While others may argue that human experience and human expression of any kind will always be of interest to the historian, it should be borne in mind that a substantial element of subjectivity and conjecture permeates Ray's *History*. What is more, much of it is based on limited, sometimes, piecemeal, evidence. Wherever this is the case, Niharranjan freely admits it. One of the great values of his work is, in fact, the directions he suggests where means do not allow for the presentation of proofs. His subjectivity and conjecture may merely take the student of history from the dark into the half dark, but the half dark is at least a realm of possibility, a realm wherein an

intelligent imagination and further research may discover springboards to a more illuminated realm.

The full title of Ray's work—*History of the Bengali People. Ancient Period*—warrants some consideration. P. C. Sen wonders about the usefulness of the term 'ancient period' (*adiparva*) when Ray repeatedly uses more specific, dynastic terms such as 'Gupta period' or 'Pala period' ¹⁴. For the sake of making more simple one's description of developments in, say, art, one might be tempted to follow the traditional approach and periodise the history of Bengal under broad, dynastic headings. Notwithstanding his dislike for the dynastically determined approach to history, Niharranjan Ray does, however, allow for a degree of dynastic synthesis, conceiving of the Gupta period as the classical period, the golden age of a growing vision of Greater India, and of post-Gupta Bengal in two broad phases: the Pala-Chandra and the Sena-Varmana. Ray's own interest in this division is clear, for he frequently reminds us that the kings of the former period were Bengali and Buddhist while those of the latter were non-Bengali and Brahmanical. The social climate of the Pala period greatly reflected the Buddhist attitudes of tolerance and harmony, while that of the Sena period revealed the rigidity of Brahmanical stratification and disjunction. Niharranjan would have us believe that the legacy of the Palas was a rich and glorious one, consisting largely in an enhanced sense of the Bengalis' own ethnic and cultural integrity, while the legacy of the Senas, to be blunt, was capitulation to the Muslim invaders.

Niharranjan Ray displays a keen insight into historical perspective. Not only is his book constructed on a pattern of unity and with a constant concern for integration, but his interpretation of subject matter is shaped and directed by an acute perception of the emanation and acting out of syntheses throughout the history of Bengal. Neither capitulation nor revolutionary process is to be seen in the evolution of history from pre-Aryan tribalism to the peaks of imperial splendour in the Maurya and Gupta periods, through the nationalism of Shashanka, the Anarchy and the restoration under Gopala to the imposition of the non-Bengali dynasty of the Senas.

Hence 'ancient period' is a useful term in that it allows for the broadest possible extent of historical ebb and flow. Naturally, the term, due to the essential vicissitudes that dominate history, cannot be monolithic, and some sub-periodisation is necessary; significantly, though, in Ray's *History of the Bengali People* the sub-periodisation is not conveniently dynastic but qualitative and value determined.

As noted earlier, Ray's syncretic methodology was anticipated by N. K. Bose as early as 1929. In his *Cultural Anthropology*⁴² he cites Wissler⁴³ in determining the nature of cultural anthropology. 'Culture', he holds, comprises speech, material traits, art, mythology, knowledge, religion, family and social systems, property, government and war. The bringing of such a diversity of enquiry under the one umbrella is a fundamental aim of Bose's monumental *The Structure of Hindu Society (Hindu Samajer Garan)*⁴⁴ published in Bengali in the same year (1949) as *History of the Bengali People*, Ray's grand endeavour to integrate a wide variety of sources and disciplines. Also in 1929 Bose described culture in essentially Hindu terms, asserting *dharma* as the cultural umbrella embracing *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* which classify the customary practices of Hindu civilization. A similar approach applied by Ray to Indian historiography has already been discussed.

The cultural anthropological approach discussed by Bose as early as 1929 and taken up by him in *The Structure of Hindu Society* twenty years later is clearly evident in Ray's *History*. The seeking out of cohering undercurrents is a prominent feature of Ray's methodology, and the umbrella technique of syncretising various disciplines and bringing them into a single framework gives his work its originality in Bengali historiography. Intimations of this syncretic approach might also be seen clearly in Ray's earlier works, *Maurya and Sunga Art* and *Ravindra Sahityer Bhumika*. It is quite fair to suggest, then, that Ray's debt to Bose was a significant one.

The criticism most commonly levelled against Ray's *History* is Niharranjan's deliberate neglect of the established conventions of source acknowledgement; the work, in both the unabridged editions and in the abridged edition, is quite devoid of footnotes or end notes, and this is not the result of

carelessness or printer's economy. Niharranjan freely expressed his distaste for footnoting as something of a literary blemish, and in his Preface to the work he implies that they are a hindrance. The book is primarily intended, he states, for the general reader, who does not want to be burdened with a surfeit of technical fine print. The excuse is not satisfactory, for whereas the book has certainly enjoyed a huge general readership (who *may* share Niharranjan's respect for the aesthetic over the academic), it cannot be said that, notwithstanding the oft-perceived modesty of Niharranjan, the work has but minimal interest in academic circles. Footnotes, indeed, provide the only way of testing the veracity of points made in the text. In so many ways Ray's *History* is an exceptionally important work which, unfortunately, has to bear the suspicion that its veracity could be vulnerable. Such an immense work must be open to question on many substantial issues; such an ambitious work's interpretations must sometimes be vague or ambiguous. Without proper footnoting the work has weaknesses of its own creation which might well, by observance of established convention, have been avoided.

The original edition of the work offers a bibliography at the end of each chapter, and in the revised edition these bibliographies have been enlarged and updated. The abridged edition has a list of relevant inscriptions, but no bibliography. The revised edition has an appendix to most of the chapters giving an account of developments in research on the respective subjects since the original publication. Yet the bibliographies and appendices go only a part of the way in corroborating Niharranjan's text. As he says himself, he has introduced no new material of his own but has relied on the research of previous scholars. The generally presented bibliographies and appendices cannot adequately acknowledge particularly the work of earlier scholars. P. C. Sen claims that this is an over-riding fault in Ray's work; in particular, he refers to an unidentified article of Shashibhusan Dasgupta which he claims is unacknowledged¹⁴⁸, and claims that Ray owes a considerable debt to the work of Benay Kumar Sarkar, a debt which also has gone unacknowledged¹⁴⁹.

From a literary point of view, we should note that Ray's work has been recognized by many as a classic of Bengali prose. In his Foreword, Sir Jadunath Sarkar has written of Ray's decision to write *History of the Bengali People* in Bengali.

There would have been much personal advantage for Niharranjan had he written this work in English; his book would have had a wide circulation and his fame and reputation would have been far-reaching. However, his choice not to write in English is evidence of his profound reverence for Bengali language and literature¹⁴⁷.

There was also an understandable nationalist element in Ray's choice of Bengali. English had been dominant as the language of history prior to Niharranjan Ray, Bengali works reaching a more limited reading public; however, Bengali was certainly the more appropriate language for the writing of people's history. It may well be argued that history may be written for reasons of pure scholarship, in which case the language is not particularly relevant other than, perhaps, for the desire to reach a wider public. History which is just as scholarly may also be written to enkindle a degree of nationalist awakening, and in this case language is of paramount importance. The history of a people should, ideally, excite the imagination and invigorate the mind of that people; this can hardly be done in a foreign language. Thus Ray's *History of the Bengali People* has a truly nationalist significance that it could not have had in English.

Moreover, Niharranjan's choice of Bengali was a happy one artistically, for his *History of the Bengali People* is a remarkable literary achievement, and certainly one of the main reasons for its appeal is its rich readability. Niharranjan employs with polished skill many of the techniques of the novelist. He is an expert story-teller, and the work has a wonderful narrative quality borne out, for example, in the romance and suspense in his relation of the sack of Navadvipa or in the intrigue and excitement pervading his account of the rivalry between Shashanka and Harshavardhana. Even if he is describing the methods of measuring land or the layout of

a village, listing places and items of trade, tracing the roads and waterways of ancient Bengal, talking of the various pursuits of scholars in the Buddhist monasteries or reconstructing temples, Ray seems always to have foremost in his mind one of the basic aims of the skilled story-teller : to enable the reader to see as much as possible of whatever he is talking about. It is probably this quality above all others that lends to Ray's *History* a vibrancy and soul.

The art of the dramatist is also evident. There are a number of great individuals who find a special place on Ray's stage, and they are by no means treated as mere functionaries in the transaction of historical affairs, but are presented as the animate and complex characters in a drama and are judged, liked or disliked according to essentially human criteria. Their accomplishments are seen as those of men and women rather than of heroes, as human beings grappling with life rather than as creations of legend, and their warts are revealed with unabashed candour. But it is not only the breath of Shashanka, Divya, Ramapala, Dipankara or Lakshmanasena that vitalises Ray's *History of the Bengali People*; the hosts of anonymous characters are also represented with a notable dynamism : the uncouth mobs of Rarha who hurled abuse at Mahavira and his disciples, the submissive peasants of Suhma who bowed like reeds before the force of Raghu, the Shavaras in pursuit of game and the Doms engaged in song and dance, the monks assiduously copying manuscripts, the merchants tramping the highways or plying the waterways in quest of markets and profits, the fortune-hunting companions of Bakhtyar and the panic-stricken retainers of Lakshmanasena all serve not merely to swell the scenes but also to invigorate and advance the action. The dramatist also shows great care for his setting and its faithful re-creation, be it the Sena court, the docks at Tamralipti, the narrow mountain passes of the northeast, the splendour of the Paharpur Temple, the colour and gaiety of a rustic wedding, the streets of the town coming to life after dusk or the village barns at the time of the autumn harvest.

It is a richly poetic work. Amongst the more obvious poetic elements of simile and metaphor, one of the literary strengths of the work is the pervasive image of the river—here a straight

and single channel, there a capricious and turbulent stream, elsewhere a mighty and diverse network of inter-related waterways of varying degree and potential. The metaphor is, of course, entirely appropriate, Bengal being a land of so many rivers, and it has an easy applicability throughout. Ray skilfully employs it to give colour to anthropological discussion, clarity to linguistic analysis, simplicity to sociological description and significance to religious enquiry.

All in all, *History of the Bengali People* reveals nobility of language and loftiness of style, reflecting the influence on Niharranjan of Bankim Chandra and Tagore. Nevertheless, history written in such a grand style and with such a wealth of Sanskritic vocabulary, taking for its expression so broad a canvas and a desire to present an immense diversity of material, must inevitably lay itself open to charges of verbosity, repetitiousness and diffusion of argument. So much of the subject matter of history is not naturally suited as the stuff of great literature, and there are parts of the work that read rather more like a gazeteer than grand literature (the chapter dealing with language and learning is the most patent example of this tendency). By necessity the work suffers a little from unevenness. While not really minimising its greatness, such blemishes cannot be ignored.

Finally, we should consider the nationalist nature of the work. *History of the Bengali People* was conceived—and the bulk of it written—well before the second partition in 1947, while Bengal had a Muslim majority population that had grown in the province over the previous seven hundred years or so. Niharranjan's most famous work makes no real mention of them. Of course, he intended to write a sequel to the *adiparva* one, but for one reason or many he did not get around to it. One cannot blame him for that. Yet as it stands this classic history of the Bengali people remains a history of the Bengali Hindus (and, to a lesser extent, Buddhists) ending, as it does, with the clouds of Turkish Islam darkening the twilight of the Hindu epoch. The cataclysm into which Bengal, under a decadent regime, was launched by Muhammed Bakhtyar and his band of warriors seems a natural point at which to discern an end to the *adi parva*. To describe Ray as anti-Muslim would

be, to be sure, spitefully inaccurate. It is, however, unfortunate—given the nature of the evolved ethnicity and culture of modern Bengal—that an epic history of the Bengalis had to stop short of its second volume.

In venturing some assessment of Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People*, I have noted that it is a pioneering work in the social history of India. I have been concerned with the aim to focus on the common people, the range of Ray's resources, and his endeavours to discern broad historical perspectives and syntheses. In particular, I have noted the literary value of the work as well as some of its literary blemishes and its most unfortunate lack of footnotes. In all, however, I have tried to advance the view that Ray's work is a truly eminent piece of Bengali scholarly literature.

Indeed, Ray's *History* represents very much a culmination of the time. The great thinkers and artists of the age, the Bengali folk tradition, the people of Bengal working out a modern identity, the political forces that gave to Bengal both freedom from colonialism and territorial truncation—all of these in various ways give spirit and purpose to the book. Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People* is as much a landmark in the evolution of the Bengali identity as it is a beacon in the evolution of Bengali historical scholarship.

Conclusion

Mahendrachandra Ray was known as a dedicated and popular teacher¹⁴⁸ and it would seem that Niharranjan inherited something of his father's passion for teaching. He enjoyed the work immensely and was very popular with his students¹⁴⁹. Professor Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, in an interview with Niharranjan Ray, noted the close relationship between the younger Niharranjan and his students.

In our days we used to hear a great deal about your very deep involvement with the students of the University, particularly with your own students, and they too, seem to have been crazy about you, if I may say so¹⁵⁰.

In response Niharranjan recalled that his close personal involvement with students often raised the ire of older colleagues who preferred a more reserved approach.

The importance of the personal involvement in teaching - that does not come from writing or lecturing to a large group - remained with Niharranjan throughout his life. After he had left the University and gone to Simla as Founder-Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies, he derived great joy out of the personal contact of the seminars and discussion groups that he organized there. (On the occasions when I was able to meet with him in his last years, I always had to share his company at home with several other callers who had come to seek his opinion or advice, and he was unfailingly patient and generous with all who sought his counsel.)

In considering Ray's contribution to Bengali scholarship, it is significant to note the quintessential teacher in the man. To him, learning was not really separable from living. Having noted his concern for social rather than political history, and his interest in the common man and the urge to tell history from the bottom, we should also note his philosophy of learning. What was the point of it to him?

I must confess that I never aimed at being a scholar *per se*; scholarship for its own sake, mere scholasticism never appealed to me. My one aim in studying Indian history, art and culture was to know my country and my people, as they were through the centuries and as they are today¹⁵¹.

Of course, he recognized the over-riding importance of intellectual discipline in the study of any subject, but the related elements of personal satisfaction and national identity were to him paramount.

... I would like to be considered as an humble intellectual who seeks to interpret India's life, history and culture, objectively and critically, of course, but also perceptively and creatively¹⁵².

In all of this Niharranjan might seem to have possessed more of the passion of the artist than the erudition of the scholar. Those who were in personal contact with him—not just his students, but those, for example, who sat around him in his room in the University in the forties and heard him read for their critical appraisal extracts from the embryonic *Bangalir Itihas*—appreciated much sound academic erudition, but they must also have perceived and been infected by Niharranjan's own joy in his work.

Ray's contribution to scholarship, however, extends much further than the milieu of those who were close to him, and so it is on the written legacy that we should concentrate.

Throughout his career Ray was perplexed by a lingual dilemma : whether to write in English or in Bengali. His first work on Tagore, *Ravindra Sahityer Bhumika* (1941), was written in Bengali as was his great *History* (1949). Sometimes, indeed, he wished he had written more in his mother tongue.

...all that I have written in English I would have certainly loved to do originally in Bengali, the one language which I have learnt to speak and write. English is not a language which I have been able to master well enough¹⁵³.

However, Ray felt the need to have communion with universal academia and believed that his experiments in methodology and interpretation ought to be exposed to critical appraisal

beyond his Bengali readership. Hence, most of his major works were written in English, and it is through these works that he is best known. For instance, his English work on Tagore, *An Artist in Life* (1967) was widely welcomed outside of Bengal, both in India and in the West, while his *Maurya and Sunga Art* had by 1974 run into two editions with a third being called for. Niharranjan reflected that

this does not usually happen to technical treatises in the field of art history¹⁵⁴.

Perhaps somewhat ruefully he added :

I wish this happened with *Bangalir Itihas* as well¹⁵⁵.

It is ironic that Niharranjan's greatest work could not bring him the international fame that was heralded by his works in English.

However convincing the reasons for writing in English may have been, Ray won great acclaim for the brilliance of his Bengali prose, and it was, indeed, a source of considerable disappointment in academic circles in Bengal that Niharranjan did not write more than he did in Bengali. According to P. C. Sen, Niharranjan Ray's *History of the Bengali People* had served to elevate the writing of history to an art form, one on the same literary plane as the works of Bankim Chandra and Tagore; he had raised *chintamaya sahitya* to the level of *rasasahitya*¹⁵⁶. In his Foreword to the original edition of Ray's *History*, Sir Jadunath Sarkar is no less fulsome in his praise of Niharranjan's literary genius.

History aside, the book is remarkable from a literary and lingual point of view. No Bengali work has hitherto been written—historical or otherwise—in such a clear, comprehensive, scholarly and rational way...[The] work is characterised by a depth of knowledge, a vibrancy of style, detailed perception, creative thinking of a high order and, above all, an objective independence of thought. The work warrants pride of place in Indian history writing in general¹⁵⁷.

Niharranjan Ray's contribution to Bengali scholarship, then, was in no small measure a literary one.

His contribution must also be assessed in terms of the range of his interests. In the context of his time there was nothing unusual about Ray's expertise over quite a gamut of disciplines; when he was a young man, specialisation was by no means as common as it has become now. What is noteworthy is not the fact that he wrote on a number of different subjects, but that in most of his work he sought to integrate conventionally discrete disciplines. It cannot be gainsaid that Ray was one of the major pioneers of the syncretic approach, and in two particular fields—art and history—his work has been a beacon for other scholars.

While his work based on an integrationist methodology made a major contribution to Bengali scholarship, so too did his endeavour to shift the emphasis of history from the pinnacle to the base of the societal pyramid. This endeavour, however, gave rise to something of a paradox, for whereas Ray clearly asserted that the primary object of his interest was the countless and anonymous common people, he found it impossible to ignore the achievements of the elites. It might fairly be claimed that Niharranjan did considerably more than any of his predecessors in projecting the masses as a worthy focus of scholarly enquiry, thus giving history some degree of popular appeal, yet to choose as a subject the art of the Mauryas and Sungas or the court painting of the Mughals, for example, is to write about the achievements of elites. The world of the common man can, of course, be slotted into that of the elite, but the extent to which history can be written from the bottom must be limited when the subject is the art commissioned by royalty. The paradox is not entirely resolved in the comprehensive *History of the Bengali People*, either, where all too often that which is of interest or of great moment relates directly to the upper echelons of society and only indirectly to the lower ones. Maybe a Marxist historian like Kosambi is more true to the ideal of history from the bottom, while Niharranjan was never willing to pay the full price of commitment to an intellectual and ideological infrastructure. Thus, the paradox remains.

The subjective element in Ray's work will always give rise to contention amongst critics. For his subject matter to be as

extraordinarily broad as it is, he has had to rely heavily on the research of others. On his own frequent admission his work is the interpretation of material already known. The inevitable subjectivity, exacerbated by a relative unconcern for footnotes (especially in works based on series of lectures—*Nationalism in India*, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society*, for example) will provide much fertile ground in the field of creative speculation, though there will be some for whom it will dilute the writer's authenticity.

The strengths of Niharranjan Ray's scholarship need not be enunciated yet again. In summary let us simply observe that *History of the Bengali People* represents a signal turning-point in Bengali historical scholarship, yet—seminal as it might well be said to be—the work has not been emulated in Bengali or in English. Contemporary scholars may regard the task undertaken by Niharranjan nearly half a century ago to be too big to be worth the trouble. It may also be that in the present condition of research into ancient Bengal, Ray's *History* continues to be the last word on the subject. The future historians in whom he trusted to put flesh to his skeleton have yet to supersede his great work.

Finally, let us note that *History of the Bengali People* was popularly received by the Bengalis, not so much for its scholarship, perhaps, as for the fact that it came to them as *their* history. It culminated a trend amongst Bengali writers and artists to establish a regional identity. Coming as it did so close upon the Partition of India of 1947—which was sorely meaningful in east India as the second partition of Bengal—it restored something to the Bengali mind, distressed and humiliated by the truncation of its homeland and the emasculation of its spirit, that might inspire it with a consoling pride in its ancient past. But while the inspiration of its Bengali nationalism may have thrilled its reading public, its erudition and scholarship nevertheless abide.

Over recent decades scholarly vision has been narrowed by the increasing trend towards specialisation. On the one hand, knowledge in particular fields has become more profound and a more intense understanding has developed. On the other hand, particular fields of learning have too easily

become self-contained and separate from one another. For fear, perhaps, of diluting the experience enhanced by concentration of interest, the lofty endeavour to discern the rich harmony of something approaching the human experience as a whole has generally been avoided.

It was the quest for such harmony that gave to the work of Niharranjan Ray its characteristic significance. Emanating from a grand breadth of vision, motivated by a passion for humanity and the articulation of its nobler impulses, and spurred on by a keen and ever-questioning intellect, Ray's scholarship is a lofty philharmonic expression that seeks to portray mankind in as broad a perspective as possible. The natural quest for harmony in life ensures a continuing place for polymaths, for whom the endeavour of Niharranjan Ray remains an invaluable legacy.

Notes

1. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, February 20, 1978.
2. N.R. Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, translated by John W. Hood, Orient Longman, 1994, p. ix.
3. *Illustrated Weekly of India*, July 5, 1970.
4. Kalyan Kumar Ganguli, "Bangalir Itihas : A Departure in Indian Historiography" in Amita Ray, H. Sanyal and S. C. Ray (Eds.), *Indian Studies. Essays Presented in Memory of Professor Niharranjan Ray* (Caxton Publications, New Delhi, n.d.), p.7.
5. N. R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. xv.
6. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New York : The John Day Company, 1946).
7. Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (ed.), *History and Society. Essays in Honour of Professor Niharranjan Ray* (K. P. Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1978), pp. 618-19.
8. Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism. Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1971).
9. Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Education", in Wm. Th. de Bary (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1958), p. 601.
10. See, for example, Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire. Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Firma KLM Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1981) and Amitabha Mukherjee, *Reform and Regeneration in Bengal. 1774-1823* (Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta, 1968).
11. Surendranath, a Bengali Brahman, had been dismissed from the Indian Civil Service for a relatively minor mistake. His punishment was far more severe than an Englishman might have expected to receive. Despite his appeal to London, a civil service career was closed to him, and he was also prevented from presenting for bar examinations.
12. *Rajmohan's Wife*, 1864.

13. *Bankim Rachanavali* (Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta 1953), eleventh edition, 1984), Vol. II, p. 283.
14. Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences* (Macmillan, London, 1917), Pocket Tagore Edition, 1980, p. 249.
15. T. W. Clark, "The Role of Bankimchandra in the Development of Indian Nationalism" in C. H. Philips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (Oxford University Press, 1961).
16. *Bankim Rachanavali*, Vol. II, pp. 660-61.
17. *ibid.*, p. 236.
18. N. R. Ray, *op. cit.* p.2.
19. *Svadesh* 20, in Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitavitan* (Visva-Bharati, 1931, 1982), p. 255 (my translation).
20. Leonard Gordon, *Bengal, The Nationalist Movement* (Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 145.
21. Cited in *ibid.*, p.93.
22. Arun Chandra Guha, *First Spark of Revolution. The Early Phase of India's Struggle for Independence, 1900-1920* (Orient Longman, 1971), pp.92 ff.
23. *ibid.*, p. 93.
24. See, for example, Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (Macmillan India, 1983), pp.124 ff., and Leonard Gordon, *op. cit.*, p.81.
25. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
26. *ibid.*, p. 214.
27. *ibid.*, p. 216.
28. *ibid.*, pp. 247-48.
29. *ibid.*, p. 256.
30. *ibid.*, p. 256.
31. *ibid.*, p. 256.
32. Founded by Pramathanath Mitra in about 1897. (On the date, see Gopal Halder, "Revolutionary Terrorism", in Atulchandra Gupta (ed.), *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance* (The National Council of Education, Bengal, Jadavpur, 1958), p. 236, and David M. Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left* (Firm K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1975), p.4.
33. R. C. Majumdar, *History of Modern Bengal*, (Bharadwaj and Co., Calcutta, 1981), Part 2, p. 91.

34. Chattopadhyay (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 616.
35. See N. R. Ray, *Krishti Kalchar Samskriti* (Vichitra-Vidya-Granthamala, Jijnasa, Calcutta, 1979).
36. *Prachin Bangla O Bangali*.
37. *Bharater Samskriti*.
38. Edited by N. K. Basu and published in *Indian Studies Past and Present*, Vol.III, Nos.1 and 2, and by Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta 1962.
39. H. C. Chakladar, *Social Life in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1929; second, revised edition, Susil Gupta, Calcutta, 1954).
40. G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, (Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber and Co., London, 1932).
41. Chattopadhyay, *op. cit.*
42. S.K.Chatterji, *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (University of Calcutta, 1926; a reprint was published by Allen and Unwin in 1971 with a third volume containing addenda and corrigenda by the author).
43. S. K. Chatterji, *Indo-Aryan and Hindi* (Ahmedabad, 1942), based on a series of lectures given in 1940.
44. Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture* (YMCA, Calcutta 1933).
45. *ibid.*, p. xi.
46. *ibid.*, p. xi.
47. *ibid.*, p. xii.
48. *ibid.*, pp. 128-29.
49. *ibid.*, p. xiii.
50. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 624.
51. D. C. Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (University of Calcutta, 1920).
52. *ibid.*, p.v.
53. *ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.
54. *ibid.*, p. xvii.
55. D. C. Sen, *Glimpses of Bengali Life* (Calcutta University Press, 1925).
56. Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Dramatist* (Calcutta, 1926).
57. N. R. Ray, *An Artist in Life. A Commentary on the Life*

- and Works of Rabindranath Tagore* (University of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1967), p. 46.
58. *ibid.*, p.52.
 59. *ibid.*, p.53.
 60. N. R. Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, p. xv; Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 618-19.
 61. Krishna Kripalani, *Tagore. A Biography* (Oxford University Press, London, 1962; Second Revised Edition, Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1980), p. 67.
 62. N. R. Ray, *An Artist in Life*, p. 66.
 63. N. R. Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, p.15.
 64. Discussed in N. R. Ray, *An Artist in Life*, p. 392.
 65. The Govind Ballabh Pant Memorial Lecture, March 30, 1976, published by the Govind Ballabh Pant Memorial Society, New Delhi.
 66. *ibid.*, p. 18.
 67. N. R. Ray, *An Artist in Life*, p. 394.
 68. *ibid.*, pp. 397-98.
 69. N. R. Ray, *Address to the Visva-Bharati Samavartana, March 9, 1974* (Shantiniketan, 1974), p. 6.
 70. R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, Vol. I (The University of Dacca, 1943), p. 528.
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